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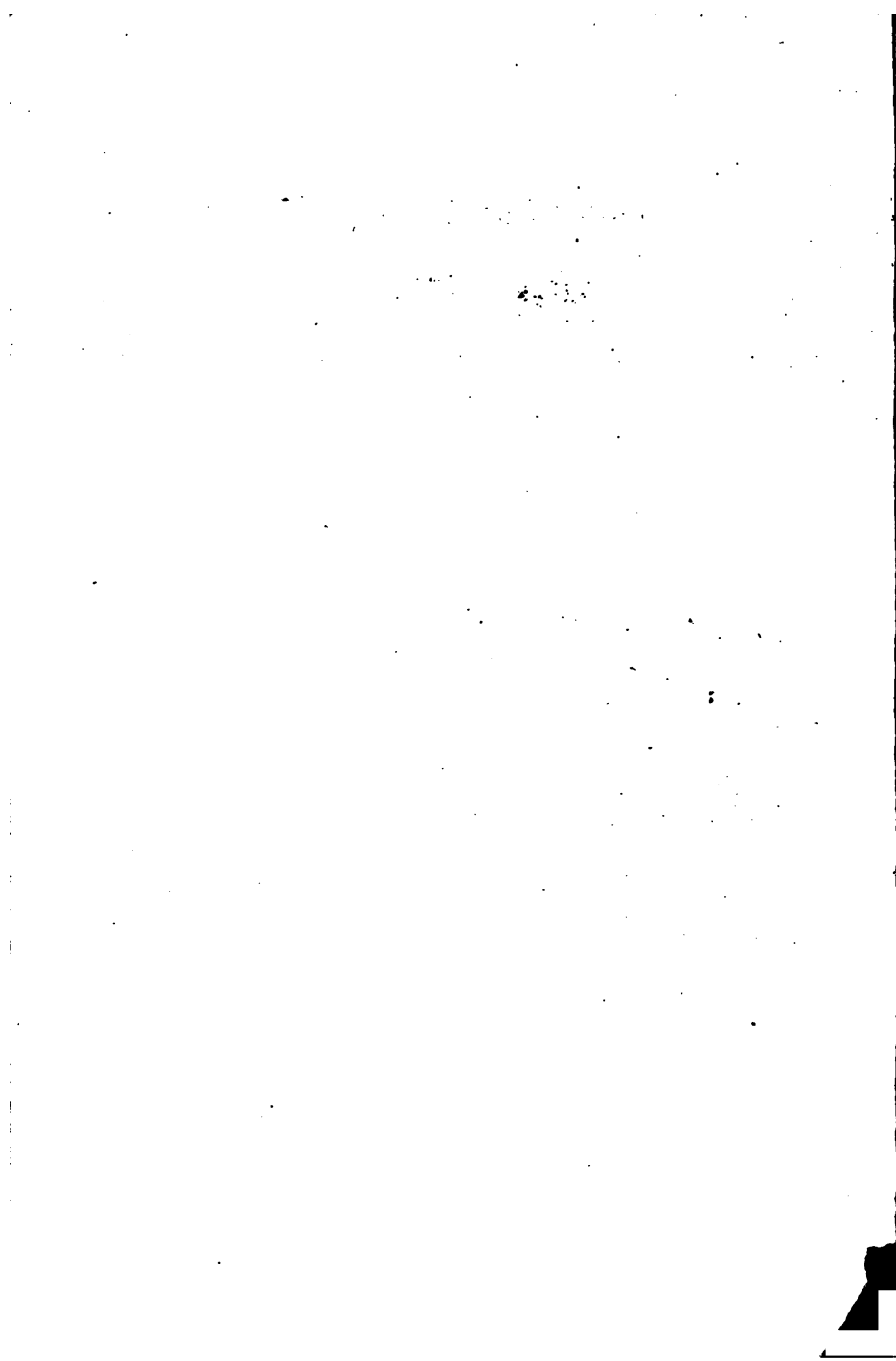
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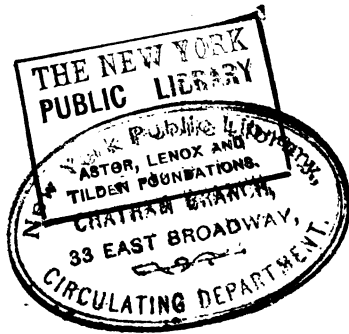
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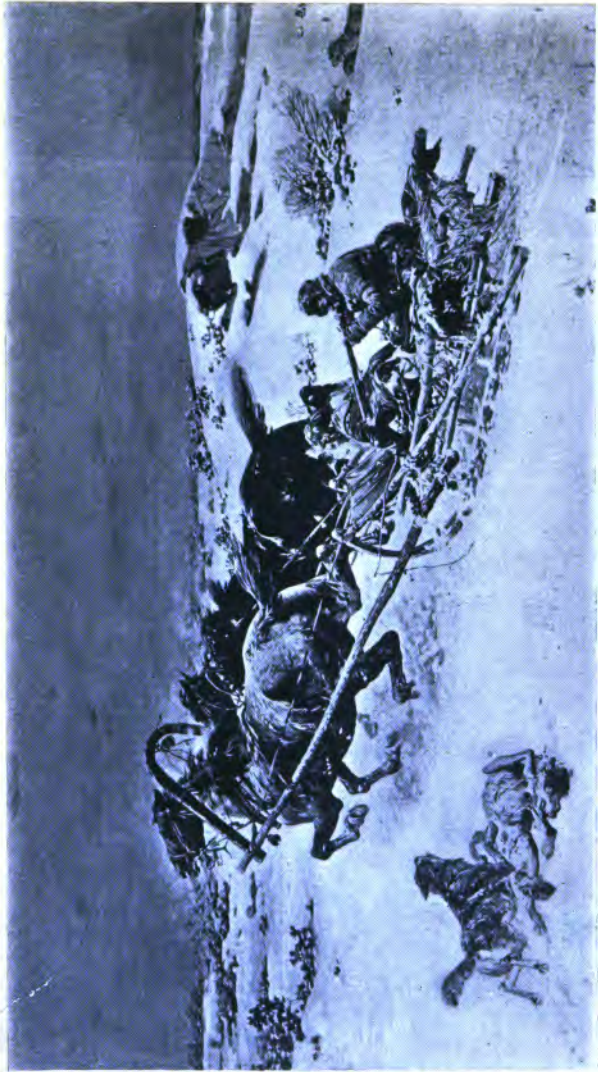


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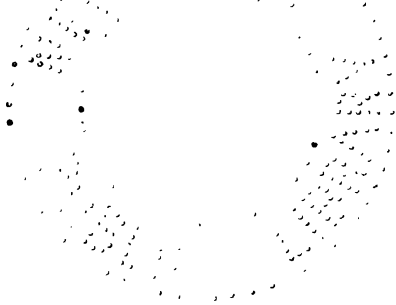
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# THE LONG ROAD

BY

JOHN OXENHAM

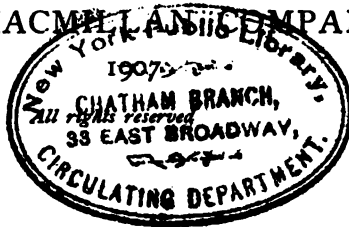
AUTHOR OF "BARBE OF GRAND BAYOU," "HEARTS IN  
EXILE," "THE GATE OF THE DESERT," "PROFIT  
AND LOSS," "WHITE FIRE," ETC., ETC.



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THE LONG ROAD



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## THE LONG ROAD

### CHAPTER I

ONE of the profoundest impressions of Stepan Iline's childhood was mud, and one of the most lasting. Just as the clammy mud had stuck to his aching little feet on the long, long road from Kazan in Russia to Irkutsk in Siberia, — the road that seemed as if it would never end, — so the recollection of it hung dark in his memory for many a long year — in fact, until he grew to manhood and had other and better things to think about.

And even then the mud was never to be quite forgotten, because the sight of Katia made him think of it at times, and at such times he smiled, though it was no smiling matter when he was up to his knees in it. For, you see, Katia had come to him in the mud and he had never forgotten the very first time he saw her.

"Cling tight to my gown, little Stepan, or thou wilt be lost in the mud!" said his mother, as she had said it many scores of times before.

And each time Stepan took a fresh grip of her coarse

NOTE. — The extraordinary decree on which this story is founded is not an effort of the imagination, but simple, historical fact.

woollen gown, and dragged his feet out of the sticky mud, and plunged them in again, and dragged them out again, and so managed to get along by her side somehow.

They were his own feet, he knew, because he could see them, or the lumps of mud that represented them, at the ends of his own two legs, but he could not feel them, except as weights. And if the mud had not been so very cold he would not have minded, indeed he would rather have liked plunging through it. But the mud was cold as ice, and it was only sometimes at night that his feet got warm again, and even hot, and tingled and smarted. That was when his father or mother was not too weary to chafe them back to life. At other times they felt like frozen stones and were so heavy that he could scarcely drag them along.

Where the ground was frozen hard his mother would give him her hand, and he would trot along contentedly, knowing that sooner or later they would stop and would perhaps have something to eat — would certainly lie down and go to sleep. And going to sleep was the very best thing life offered him in these times.

But in the bad places, where the frozen mud was churned into sticky paste by the hundreds of feet in front, his mother had to hold up her gown to her knees or she could not have got through at all. And his father trudged heavily in front laden with the things he had brought all the way from their old home in

Kazan,— some of his tools and odds and ends that would be of service when they reached their journey's end and were allowed to settle down in this new country.

His father spoke little, and his face was always set in a gloomy frown, for he was all the time wondering why such things were, and the answer was always just beyond him.

There were close upon two hundred in their convoy, — men, women, and children. There were more when they started. The weaker ones had reached their journey's end quicker than the stronger. But they would not have made good settlers, so they were just as well where they were,— in the snowdrifts, in the swamps, by the roadside,— just where they fell and were left behind.

“Is it far, little mother?” asked little Stepan, for the twentieth time that day.

“Not far now, my man,” said his mother, cheerfully, for the twentieth time also.

So little Stepan floundered on hopefully. For, although he had had the same answer so often before, and he was tramping through the mud still, his mother's voice always put fresh heart into him. Besides, the mud was so deep just here, and there was so much of it, that he thought, from experience, that they must be coming to a village. The mud was always deepest as they came into or went out of a village.

“I can see the houses,” said his mother at last.

"Shall we get something to eat, little mother?"

"Please God," said his mother, and little Stepan took a fresh grip of her gown, and drew his feet out of the mud with a manful jerk, and plunged them in again with resolution. For even when the village folk had given all they could spare to those in front, there was always some one who could find a crust for little Stepan.

The villagers crowded their doors to see them pass, and the doleful song the prisoners sang emptied the scanty cupboards into their eager hands. For most of those who gave had in their time—they or their forbears—been in like dismal case, and they were used to giving to the unfortunates on the long road.

By reason of little Stepan's very short legs, his father and mother were generally toward the rear of the company, and but for the pleading of his hungry little face would often have come off badly in the quest for food.

As now. The melancholy chant of the hungry seeking bread rose and fell along the wide street of the village. The weary eyes of the travellers clung longingly to the wooden houses where men and women dwelt year in, year out. They thought of the homes they had once had in Russia, and wondered hopelessly if they would ever have homes again. The whiffs of wood smoke that blew down to them from the chimneys, now and again, were very sweet. They were almost as good as food. They sniffed them up eagerly.

Some got loaves of black bread, some got pieces of

meat. But these were the fortunate early comers. The later ones got little but pitying looks which did not go far toward the satisfaction of clamouring stomachs.

At the door of the first house stood a man and his wife, and a small girl with her head pushed through between them, watching the long procession pass.

They had long since given what they had to give. They could only shake their heads at the rest. They were beginning to feel hurt at the reproachful looks that were cast at them, as though they had not done their best.

Little Stepan stopped in front of them and looked at the little girl. She was very pretty. She wore a close little cloth cap, and her fair curls came streaming out below it. Her eyes were very dark blue, and full of wonder and pity.

She looked at little Stepan and Stepan looked at her. She was the prettiest little girl he had ever seen in his life.

Then, of a sudden, she drew her hand through from behind, and held it out to him, with a large round cake in it just from the oven.

It was quite too good an offer for a hungry boy to refuse. Little Stepan's white teeth were in it as he nodded his little thanks. Never in his life had he tasted so good a cake nor seen so pretty a little girl.

And as he ate he stared hard at her, and never forgot how nice she looked, with her streaming curls and her blue eyes full of wonder and pity.



“Da, now! You’ve given away your supper, Katenka, and it’s all you’ll get to-night,” said the mother, half angry at such uncalled-for generosity.

And little Stepan, understanding too late, stopped his hungry little jaws with an effort, and held out the scrap of cake that was left to the supperless one.

But the small girl shook her head, and smiled, and clung shyly to her mother’s dress, for little Stepan was thick with mud, and it had splashed up even to his face and almost hid it. But what little Katenka had seen of it she had liked.

“The Good God and all His Holy Angels keep you, little Katenka!” said Stepan’s mother, and then the dismal company passed on.

## CHAPTER II

AND always as they walked little Stepan's father — Ivan Iline, of Kazan, in the far-away province by the great river Volga — trudged along with bent head and perplexed face, like a grim note of interrogation.

His slow mind was always asking: "Why is this? Why are we here?" and he could never find any reasonable answers to those simple questions.

A dull-witted mind of a surety! All the day he was full of bitter thought, and fuller still when they stopped for the night, and his mind had nothing but itself to feed upon, and his body not much more.

For this was before the days of organised exile. Badly organised as it came to be a few years later, and full of heart-breaking cruelties from that day to this, the days before,—when the unfortunate ones were driven across the steppes like cattle, but with less care, and with no provision of food save such as they could find or beg for themselves,—the days before were black days indeed.

At home in Kazan, Ivan Iline had been a blacksmith, honest, hard-working, and contented, owing no man anything, and giving fullest value for the money he earned by sweat of brow and strength of arm. A man

at all times given more to unceasing labour than to talk or thought save of the matter in hand, the meaning of the sudden catastrophe which had befallen him, uprooted his home, and launched him on the long road to Siberia, was still hidden from him, and still furnished his slow mind with ceaseless food for dull speculation.

A Jew trader, returning from the great fair at Nijni Novgorod, had stopped one day at Iline's forge for some repairs to his wagon. And so well had they been done, and at so reasonable a price, that the Jew, in the fullness of his heart and the recollection of many profitable overreachings at the fair, added to the paltry settlement the gift of a packet of snuff. Snuff of so innocent and adulterated a quality that, lacking purchasers, he had found himself under the painful necessity of using it himself, and he something of a connoisseur.

To the brawny smith it was a novelty and of ample strength. A hearty sneeze now and again, as he rested on the hammer, cleared his head and refreshed him. He felt the better for it. After sneezing he would even talk at times of matters outside the range of his eyes. The snuff seemed to waken his brain from its bucolic torpor.

But the awakening of sluggish brains — even spasmodically through the taking of adulterated snuff — was not to the liking of those in authority, since their position was secure only so long as they could block all windows to the soul and keep the people in darkness.

This man was catching stray gleams through the cracks in the shutters. He was without doubt a Progressive. Before long he would be for pulling the shutters down. He was better away.

And presently Ivan Iline found himself footing it wearily to Siberia, with the fragments of his household gods on his back, and his wife and little son plodding behind, his sole alleged crime — snuffing. The punishment seemed somehow out of proportion to the offence.

Most of his time, as he walked, was taken up in puzzled wonderment, but now and again a fellow-prisoner, tramping alongside, would open his sore heart and expect a return in kind. And so he learned, of this one and that, that he was not the only one who suffered for small cause.

One was there because he had failed to pay his taxes. Another for cutting firewood on forbidden ground. Another for not being able to hold his tongue; he had been in the army and had permitted himself to reply to the taunts of a superior. And still another because he had shown so little thrift that he became a burden to the community.

They were all gloomily puzzled at the severity of their punishments. How should they know, with their minds accustomed only to their own small twilight concerns, that those who ruled had but lately themselves awakened to the fact that, beyond the confines of their

own land, lay a new and mighty country teeming with latent possibilities,—gold, and silver, and iron; timber, and grain, and furs; fish, flesh, and fowl,—sources of wealth illimitable, lacking one thing only for its exploitation—man. Unproductive, therefore,—to the State,—till man in sufficiency should be prevailed upon to turn it to account. And as man's only desire was to stop where he was and to be left alone, and he showed quite unaccountable reluctance for adventure in unknown parts—why, there was nothing for it but to drag him up by the roots and transplant him to the Happy Land by force. Whence,—marvels of injustice, unspeakable brutalities, miseries untold, and the corruption in high places that always follows autocratic power misused.

So month by month, and year by year, the doleful companies streamed across the steppes to the Promised Land, good and bad all bound together by the iron band of evil circumstance.

And those who survived the horrors of the long road settled thankfully, if perforce, where they were allowed to, and the rest marked the road with their bones and heartened the next comers to struggle on to their appointed ends.

### CHAPTER III

BUT little Stepan's recollections of the long road were not entirely and only of mud, though the mud stuck to him longest.

It was springtime when they left their home in Kazan, and he was nine years old. He was now past ten, and they were still on the road—a long, long walk for small legs even if they were sturdy ones.

Spring, summer, autumn, winter, and spring again, the little feet had padded sturdily alongside the heavier ones. In the summer and autumn they covered twice the necessary distance each day, for then the steppes were gay with flowers and the woodlands rich with fruit. There were endless leagues of soft green grass enamelled with daisies and primroses, mile-long stretches of vivid yellow buttercups, and here and there blue forget-me-nots in such profusion that the small boy stood and looked first at the ground and then at the sky, to see if by chance some of it had not fallen on the earth.

Oh, a wonderful place, those great Siberian steppes at their best, when the sun shone out of a cloudless sky, and quite to the liking of a small boy of an inquiring turn of mind.

All day long he was never still for a moment. A dozen times a day he would break from his mother's side with a whoop and speed away after sparrows and cuckoos, and the little tufted steppe-quails which ran up fearlessly to see what all these strangers meant. And sometimes his mother's eyes would grow anxious, when he disappeared completely among the grasses which reached far above his head. But always, sooner or later, he came running in again from here and there, laden with flowers, and full of deeds of prowess almost done.

And sometimes the way led through mighty forests of elms and poplars and maples and lofty silver birches, and in the thickets he would find wild cherries and strawberries and crab-apples, and in these times he was glad they had come.

Then, out in the open again, as the year faded, the great steppes grew the colour of gold, and only in the swampy places and half-dried water-pans could he find any flowers, and the wild fruits wasted on their branches and the birds went away after the sun.

And then the first snow came, and he took a grip of his mother's gown and trudged stolidly with the rest, and asked her twenty times a day if it was still far they had to go, and each time she said, "Not far now, my man," as cheerfully as she could, and little Stepan tramped doggedly on.

But the winter was so dreadful a time that it almost

shut the door on the good times before. The sky was always gray, when it was not black dotted with falling snowflakes. The wind cut like a lash, the mud was icy cold and stuck like glue, and it was only at night that he began to get a trifle warm, and not always then unless they lay in a wood and could get their fires to burn.

For years afterwards little Stepan used to break into sudden sobs in his sleep at times, in nightmares of cold cramped feet that felt dead and buried in the icy black mud; and cold chills would run down his spine at dim recollection of frosted fingers with ragged nails that groped for a coarse woollen dress and scr-r-r-aped in it till they hooked and held. And when his mother heard him sobbing in his sleep like that, she always knew what it was, and she would take his feet into her warm hands and chafe them gently, as she used to do on the long road, and sing softly to him till the bad dream passed.

It was then, too, that he grew familiar with the long, melancholy howl of starving wolves. And that, curiously enough and yet quite comprehensibly, stirred him not to fear but to childish anger. For his mother, who was brave in the dark and cared nothing for the icy mud,—so far as he could see, at all events,—shivered at sound of the wolves till her teeth chattered, and she went in dread of them all day and all night.

And at such times little Stepan would forget his



frozen feet and fingers for the moment, and would say boldly: "Don't be afraid, little mother. If the wicked wolves come, I will kill them."

And as the wolves never came near enough for Stepan to kill them, it was hatred and anger he felt for them, but no fear. And that which was in him as a boy was in him as a man.

## CHAPTER IV

AFTER they left the village where little Katenka gave Stepan her supper-cake, they had still nearly two months of the road before them, for Irkutsk lies more than four hundred miles farther to the east, and the roads were bad and the going was slow.

But however keen the wind, and however cold the mud, little Stepan never felt either as he had done before.

The remembrance of little Katenka's shy, rosy face was like a warm fire inside him, and he thought and thought and thought about her till she seemed like an old friend to him.

And when the gray sky softened and broke, and the sun came through, and the brief spring was upon them again, he thought of her still as he gathered his armfuls of flowers by the roadside, and wished she was there so that he could give them to her.

And over and over again he said to himself, "The Good God and all His Holy Angels keep you, little Katenka!" though his ideas as to what it meant were dim and misty. But his mother had said it and so it was good, and it certainly meant good to little Katenka.

But the longest road comes to an end and they reached Irkutsk at last, and it was strange to Stepan to have a roof always above his head at night again, after living under the stars for over a year; and to be hedged in all round by houses, after the boundless width of the long road.

But he found the town better than the steppes in some respects if wanting in others. For here, at all events, were food and warmth as matters of course; here were boys and girls to play with; and here was no perpetual moving on, no icy black mud to plaster one from foot to head, and no frozen toes and fingers.

And here, for his mother, was the regular round of housewifely duties to which she had all her life been accustomed, and therein, since she lived for her husband and her boy, content and happiness such as she had hardly dared to expect again.

Iline was very soon in full work. He was just the man for a new country and a growing town, and such an excellent workman that success met him with outstretched hands. His forge was never idle from the day he set it up, and by degrees the merry clink of hammer on anvil dulled the remembrance of injustice and oppression. He never quite forgot, however, and remained to the day of his death a man of few words and of thoughts apparently too heavy for him.

He worked hard, and it may be that he hammered thoughts too dangerous for utterance into his ploughs

and horseshoes and picks and shovels. But these things were none the worse, and carried out of the forge no messages save of excellent workmanship, and his fame as a smith grew. His one indulgence was snuff-taking, and none found fault with him for that.

It was a great day for little Stepan when he was declared big enough to help in the forge, and thereafter father and son worked side by side; and the boy grew till he topped his father in height, and could wield even the heaviest sledge with equal skill, and learned all that his father could teach him. Learned, also, some of the thoughts that rolled confusedly in his father's brain, and built upon them with his own, but gave no voice to them beyond the limits of the forge, lest what had been should be again, and he be sent still farther afield.

For there were worse places even than Irkutsk.

And from his mother he learned the gentler and higher things which it is a mother's special privilege to teach.

## CHAPTER V

YOUNG Stepan — Stepka to his father and mother and a few besides, Stepan Ivanovitch elsewhere — had many friends.

He was by nature buoyant and light-hearted. The troubles of the transplanting had come upon him at too early an age to cloud him permanently. His roots in the old country had not had time to strike deeply. In the new soil they spread far and wide.

He never quite forgot the grimness of the long road, but it lay far behind him like a black winter when the summer is come, like a nightmare half remembered at midday.

But there was one thing that he never forgot, and that was the shy, rosy face of a small girl, pushed between her father and mother, with wide eyes full of wonder and pity, and the little hand that shot out instantly to the need of a hungry small boy and tendered him all she had.

He knew scores of maidens in Irkutsk, and some of them lacked little in art — as they knew it — or nature, in their appeal to a man, but they did not appeal to him. His straight blue eyes set many a maid's heart fluttering, but that was not his fault or of any set pur-

pose. He held them all in equal esteem and treated them all alike.

His mother watched cautiously, and with natural anxiety, to see where his choice would fall. But it fell nowhere, and apparently he had no thought of marrying.

And, since that was unnatural, she rallied him at times.

“Art difficult to please, my lad,” she would say. “There is Nadeja Markoff making eyes like cart-wheels at thee, and thou as blind to them all as a bat.”

“Does she so, little mother? She has beautiful eyes, has Nadeja. But then so has Natalie Minof, and so has Masha Kozlo. They are all as pretty as flowers.”

“And thou findest none prettier than the rest?”

“’Twould be hard to choose. I like them all.”

“Ay, ay — ‘like’! But it is time thou wast settling to one among them. I would like to see thee wedded before I die. And maybe dandle thy children on my knee!”

“Who talks of dying? Seems to me thou growest younger every day, little mother. And as to wedding — and children! — Bozhe-moi, time enough for all that! Art surely getting tired of thy big lad.”

“Nay, but I would have little ones as well. Nadeja, now — she is pretty, and she is modest, though she does make cart-wheel eyes at thee. But that may be

excused her since she cannot help it. And she will have a portion —”

“Will she now? What a provident little mother it is!”

“And she will come to thee if thou but lift thy finger. May’st wait longer and fare worse.”

“All the same I will wait, little mother.”

“May’st wait too long.”

“My time will come like other men’s, but I doubt if all Nadeja’s pretty cart-wheels will bring it.”

And so from time to time, as the wish grew in her, she sounded him in other directions, but got no nearer her mark, and wondered much why her boy stood unwed while all his comrades one by one found mates and set up homes for themselves.

Not that she wished him away from her. Never had mother better son. He was all that her heart could wish. If she longed to see him happily wedded, it was because she desired more for him than for herself in the matter.

And he was in a position to pick and choose, quite apart from his good looks and kindly disposition.

Honest workmanship told in Irkutsk as elsewhere. The name of Ivan Iline stood high among his fellows for many a long mile outside the city, and there were no farming or mining tools to equal his in all the province.

His business had grown, and now he had men working for him, forging his tools and their own characters

and futures under a master eye. And his right hand in the forge, and in all his business affairs, was his son Stepan, — taller and broader than his father by inches now, full as capable a craftsman, and gifted in business matters with perhaps a somewhat wider outlook — the result of a more liberal training than his father had ever enjoyed.

A desirable mate then for any girl who could capture him. Whence Nadeja's cart-wheels, and Natalie's conscious looks whenever they met, and Masha's very obvious beguilements.

He never spoke of little Katenka even to his mother. She was only a memory, but a wonderfully living one — only a thought, as it were, but the brightest and sweetest thought in his life.

The sweet child face, with its eyes full of wonder and pity, framed in its tight little cloth cap from under which streamed fair golden curls, stood out against the dim background of the past like a silver moon in a dark sky. He saw it in the white glow of the forge, in the marbled coils of the swift blue river as it rushed to the Arctic sea, in the dappled shadows of the poplar and birch trees, in the flower-sprinkled meadows.

Little Katenka went with him on journeys and came to him in his room.

He forgot much of the past, but he never forgot her. His consciousness of living as a being all himself seemed to date from the day he first saw her. Before, he had



been a child; ever since, he had felt himself growing. It was perhaps the first time he had been stirred quite out of himself and had thought more about another than about his own small concerns.

And absolutely all that he knew about her was that she had the sweetest face and the prettiest pitiful eyes in the world, and that her name was Katenka, — that is, Little Katia, — and that she lived five hundred miles away on the road to Russia. He did not even know the name of her village, for on the long road there was little to distinguish one village from another, except that some gave more and some gave less where none gave enough.

Nadeja might have eyes like cart-wheels, but little Katenka's eyes were like stars. Natalie and Masha might blush and prink, but little Katenka had only looked at him with eyes and face full of wonder and pity, and he never forgot just how she looked.

He had no conscious intention of ever seeking her. The possibilities of doing so were very remote. She might be dead. She might be married. Anything might be. But until some other could take her place in his imagination, and occupy his mind as she did, he was content as he was, and Nadeja and Natalie and Masha and all the rest might be as friendly to him as they liked, but they could be no more.

And so his mother waited and watched and wondered, and the days drew on.

## CHAPTER VI

THEN Dolgourof, the Governor, died, and Paschkin came to rule Irkutsk in his stead.

Dolgourof was a man advanced in years, fond of his ease and good living. Not a man to keep an overfirm hand on the reins, yet not to be easily ousted from a seat which he held chiefly by virtue of his relationship to the Empress. He had held high command in the army, and had married the Empress's sister. When the time came for him to give place to younger men he was given the post of Governor of Irkutsk, a little kingdom as large as Great Britain and France combined, and there, for fifteen years, he had played the easy-going autocrat to his own and his people's satisfaction.

For the time being nothing could have better met the needs of Irkutsk. Colonists, under the guise of exile, were being drafted in in thousands. They arrived off the long road smarting under manifold grievances. They found an official atmosphere milder by far than that they had left. They had lived in bureaucratic bondage, cramped and fettered on every side. Here they were free to expand and find themselves again, to live wider lives, if so they chose, than ever before.

But the very freedom which permitted such expan-

sive growth left loopholes also for a certain amount of license. Dolgourof held the reins lightly and took his ease. His subordinates could not put him to shame by any display of Spartan rigour. Things grew somewhat lax. There came at times muffled growls from Petersburg, especially when the yearly contributions to the treasury fell more and more into arrear. For Petersburg was a mighty maw with an inappeasable appetite for gold. And when it was not fed, the worms that battened on it made themselves heard.

And so, when Dolgourof died, they sent Paschkin to Irkutsk, with orders to whip his province into the paths of virtue and the full and prompt payment of its dues, by any means he deemed fit. And the job was to his liking.

He had been holding down the Khirgish Tartars, and before he had done with them, the Tartars, whatever their original beliefs on the subject, were convinced of the existence of a personal Devil, and their Devil was known by the name of Paschkin.

Worried mothers quieted their children by threats of Paschkin.

"Stop it, or I'll send thee to Paschkin!" never failed to reduced a howl to a whimper and a whimper to terrified silence.

"Paschkin get thee!" became the direst imprecation a man could hurl at his enemy.

He was that Paschkin who kept his knouts steeped

in brine, in their short intervals of rest — that Paschkin who had not scrupled to knout women naked — that Paschkin who valued a man's life at one-tenth that of a horse — that Paschkin who had proved himself able to keep order in a province when other men had failed.

That he still lived, in spite of his brutalities, says something for his tenacity and courage, if little for the mettle of his subjects. No man ever qualified more fully for sudden extinction than did his Excellency, and yet he lived, and dealt out death all about him with liberal hand, and in strange and terrifying fashions, and all men trembled before him.

He was said to be an unacknowledged offshoot of the royal tree. He had pushed his head up through the mud that surrounded the throne, and his rapid promotion gave colour to the report. He made his way by sheer bull force of will and absolute heedlessness of life — his own or any other's. He ran amok with life, and life gave way before him.

If not—as the Tartars believed—the arch-fiend himself, he was undoubtedly at times possessed of many devils. He had a mania — one among many, and all alike detestable — for odd and terrifying forms of punishment. He buried recalcitrant Tartars up to their necks in the sand and galloped his Cossacks over them. He put them in holes head downward with their feet sticking out, and set his men to tent-pegging

with their lances at the writhing feet. And when the wine worked off sooner than he had anticipated, and he lay awake of a night, he spent the time pleasantly and profitably devising new vexations for his people.

His own way, wine, horses, and women — those were his objects in life in their proper order. Any thing or body who came in between was clearly marked for destruction.

When the men of Irkutsk heard that Paschkin was coming, they shook in their boots. And some, whose thumbs pricked unduly, took warning thereby, gathered up their gear, and moved on into the wilderness while yet there was time. Nature at its savagest seemed to them preferable to Paschkin.

## CHAPTER VII

So Paschkin ruled in Irkutsk.

He gripped the reins with inflexible hands, and, like a wilful driver, drew them tight and used the lash simultaneously.

His power was absolute, and no man was found to dispute his will. Petersburg and the Tzar were very far away, and at best, to most of them, no more than names—names that spelt to some most grievous cruelty and oppression. And Paschkin was on the spot and his sole word was law, though his doings were surely inspired by the Devil.

Before he had been there a month the wretched folk whom he held in the hollow of his hand — until such time as he chose to close it and grind them to powder — had no delusions on the subject. Paschkin was the Devil himself, unmistakably and incontestably.

The lax lines were tightened with a ruthless twist, new burdens were imposed, the tribute was brought up to its maximum and more, and was despatched ahead of time. Irkutsk toed the line with a jerk that almost threw it on its back, and fell on troublous times. Life and liberty, and all the smaller things, were dependent on the whim of this one man, and he devoid of conscience

or even human feeling, and answerable to none, least of all to God, whose very distant acquaintance he had dropped even before he began to get on in the world.

Ivan Iline had prospered under Dolgourof. His wife had grown content and even happy, as the old memories faded behind the newer activities. If only Stepka would marry and provide her with a baby to dandle on her knee and fuss over, she would ask no more.

And only in that one respect did Stepka fall short of their desire. In every other way he was all that the most exacting could have wished,—a good son, an excellent workman, straight as a die, and of a joyous disposition.

Under Paschkin's grinding rule, Iline, wise in the memory of his transplanting, walked warily, kept a quiet face and a silent tongue, lived modestly, and paid his share of the increased taxes without a murmur.

He had no illusions respecting the new Governor. The man was a menace at large. The wise man avoids an obvious danger by every means in his power. As far as lay in him he would see to it that Paschkin and he came to no dispute. None but a fool puts himself in the path of the lightning.

If Paschkin came across him he would fall in with his humours. He would agree to his wildest demands. He would give him no handle against him. He was too old for strife and another uprooting.

But he did not know Paschkin.

It was the Governor's business to learn all about the men confided to his tender mercies as soon as possible.

Within two days he had gone over the roll of citizens of his capital, name by name, and had gathered into his unfailing memory the points he required concerning each.

Within a week his three-horse tarantas whirled up to Iline's forge and stopped dead in its cloud of dust.

Iline met him bareheaded at the door, with impassive face and tumultuous heart.

"You are Ivan Ivanovitch Iline?" cried the bull voice.

"At your service, Excellency," and Paschkin's keen black eyes bored into him like probes.

"You are honest, quiet, industrious, they say, and meddle with no man's business. Here twelve years."

Iline bowed.

"What brought you?"

"I was transplanted, Excellency."

"What brought you?"

"The real reason or the given, Excellency?"

"What — brought — you?"

"Irkutsk needed men. I took snuff." There was snuff on Paschkin's braided coat, and some on Iline's smock.



"You snuff still?"

"At times, Excellency."

"I name you for my council. You will come tomorrow."

And at that Iline's heart sank, but his face remained unmoved. He bowed silently.

"And this —" said the Governor in his great voice, swinging suddenly round on Stepka, who had remained discreetly in a corner, out of sight as he thought, not knowing Paschkin — "is your son?"

"At your service, Excellency," said Iline, and young Stepan stood in view in all his height and breadth.

"A likely lad. Honest?"

"As steel, Excellency."

"I have a commission for him. You know Selem-sinsk?" he asked of Stepka.

"By name only, Excellency. Since we came here I have been only to the mountains and the lake."

"It is easily found — five days back on the road you came. As I passed I saw two horses there running on the steppe, perfect blacks, and well matched. Irkutsk waited and I could not stop. You will go to Selem-sinsk, find out to whom they belong, and bring them back with you. I give five hundred roubles for the pair. You will say they are for Paschkin. You will start tomorrow. You will get fresh horses where you need them — and food. You will say, I travel for Paschkin. If any refuse you, I will hang him from his own lintel.

Come to me an hour after sunrise," and the tarantas was out of sight before the dust of its start had cleared away.

And Ivan Iline looked at his son with tightened mouth and a face that was no longer impassive.

## CHAPTER VIII

"FIVE days going, one for accidents, one day there; but returning you will take your time lest the blacks suffer. You should be back in sixteen days."

"I will do my best, Excellency," said Stepka.

"I shall look for you in sixteen days," said Paschkin, with a black frown.

"Should the blacks be out on the steppe, Excellency — "

"I give you one more day," growled Paschkin, the evil humour in him rousing at such unaccustomed questioning of his orders.

"Should the rains come and the roads go, Excellency — "

"I shall look for you in sixteen days," bellowed Paschkin. "And you will see that the blacks do not suffer."

And so, provided with a light tarantas on which was affixed an imperial badge as an open sesame to every door on the road, and three good horses, young Stepan set off at a jingling gallop on the most eventful journey of his life.

He was in the best of spirits. Here was an adventure for one whose wanderings, since the martyrdom of the

long road twelve years before, had never extended beyond the mountains in search of game, or to the shores of the great lake, forty miles away, out of which their mighty river came roaring full born.

It was a crisp September morning. The sun shone brightly in a clear blue sky. The fur shuba his mother had insisted on his taking seemed out of place, but she knew that he would be glad of it later on. There had been a spell of dry weather, and the roads, such as they were, would be in good condition. He was travelling under the all-powerful hand of Paschkin, and speed was of the essence of his service. What more could a man desire?

As the ponderous pendulum ferry swung them slowly across from the right to the left bank of the Angara, he had time to make the more personal acquaintance of his horses, — looked into their startled eyes, stroked their panting sides and soft, flapping noses, and enjoyed to the full the deference extended to his position by all on board.

Tunka, gleaming in the distance like a jewel under sun and snow, flung him a God-speed as he climbed into his seat again and swept away along the river-road to the merry chiming of his horses' bells. And the other passengers stood looking after him and said, "Bozhe-moi, he travels for Paschkin, and without doubt his skin is at stake," which Stepka would not have looked upon as flattering.

Past the monastery, to which he had often made excursion with his father and mother, and then at last the road parted from the river and wound away among the hills.

And here in places the woods were ablaze with colour, the poplars burning red, the birches flaming yellow, and in below, the dark, unchanging masses of the evergreens. Flowers, too, here and there, in swampy bottoms, — golden-rod and asters, wild mustard and spirea, bluebells and forget-me-nots. And when he came to the open, the land lay before him like a sheet of gold, here and there patches of wheat sighing for the sickle, with men and women in blue and red and brown leisurely at work among it; and out beyond, the mighty sweep of the steppe as yellow with its withered grasses as the wheat itself.

At midday he stopped at a village of a dozen gray, wooden houses, and drew up at the largest and asked for food and fresh horses.

He had been thinking it all out as he drove along. Paschkin bound him to a time limit, but gave him free hand in the matter of requisitions. It would be justice neither to himself nor his horses not to avail himself to the full of the powers of his imperial badge.

The mistress of the house set to work at once preparing a meal, but at the demand for horses the master looked black.

“I travel for Paschkin,” said Stepan, briefly; “and

I cannot help myself. Paschkin's word is that he who refuses, hangs."

"Ach! He is the Devil, they say. When do you return?"

"In fifteen, sixteen days, or thereabouts."

"Nu! When the Devil drives —" and he went out sulkily to find horses.

The meal was good, and the horses were good, and, thanks to the fear of Paschkin, they were off again within the hour. And as they swept across the lonely steppe and wound more slowly through the wooded hills, the merry clash and tinkle of his bells stirred his heart to song, and the sound of his going pealed far along the plains and woke brief echoes in the lonely aisles of the forest.

Here and there were swamps where his horses sank to the knees and his wheels to the hubs, and all round these the wild flowers still bloomed radiantly. And here and there the road had gone to pieces and he had to go warily. And at every hill he got out and walked alongside his panting horses and heartened them by word and hand.

But on the whole the roads were in good condition, and when he rattled into a village of size, an hour after sunset, he learned that it lay one hundred and twenty versts from Irkutsk, and that was just one-fifth of the extent of his journey.

Here again food and lodging were accorded him

or even human feeling, and answerable to none, least of all to God, whose very distant acquaintance he had dropped even before he began to get on in the world.

Ivan Iline had prospered under Dolgourof. His wife had grown content and even happy, as the old memories faded behind the newer activities. If only Stepka would marry and provide her with a baby to dandle on her knee and fuss over, she would ask no more.

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But he did not know Paschkin.

## CHAPTER IX

THE Governor's badge and the terror of his name overcame all the difficulties of the way. Where the village was of a size to boast a police office, Stepan drove there at once and left them to arrange matters. But the loneliest hut on the steppe had heard of Paschkin and that he was the Devil, and no man offered his head for the noose.

He was blessed with fine weather, and the roads were in as good condition as that could bring about, and on the evening of the fifth day he carried his merry peal into Selemsinsk well up to time.

"Two black horses?" said the chief of police. "Ay, they are Vasili Totsin's. And so Paschkin wants them! Totsin is proud of them, but if he'd known Paschkin was coming, he'd have hid them in the steppe, I trow."

"He won't wish to part with them?"

"You will see."

And after supper Stepan went along to Vasili Totsin's house, the last house in the village going westward, the first house you came to going east.

He knocked on the door, and it was opened instantly by a girl who stood looking out at him. The light of



the room was behind her. He could not see her face, but she seemed of a shapely figure, and the light behind rayed about her brown hair as in the pictures of the saints.

"I have come to see Mr. Totsin about some horses," said Stepan.

"Come in," said the girl. "I will find him. He is with a neighbour," and Stepan stepped into the room.

And as the girl came into the full light of the lamp, he fell back with an exclamation of profoundest amazement.

The girl stood looking at him in surprise. And indeed he was good to look upon, but here was something beyond her comprehension.

His eyes were fixed upon her face in a look that reminded her of their dog Van when he came home once after a week's wandering on the steppe. There was in it the craving of a mighty hunger, and joyful satisfaction at finding himself at home again, and more. For the startled blue eyes of this strange young man seemed to look through her, and beyond her, in a way that would have been disconcerting but for the rapt gladness that was in them too.

She was used to being looked at. The good God had given her her looks and she rejoiced in them. But no man had ever looked at her quite as this man did, with a blazing star in each eye, and an eager hunger in his face that made her wonder if he could be starving.

And no wonder there were stars in his eyes, for here, indeed, was a thing beyond belief almost.

For, day by day, as he rode across the steppe or threaded the clefts of the wooded hills, he had said to himself, "Supposing now — just supposing I came upon that village! Should I know her again? Should I know her? She must be grown by this time almost to a woman. Perhaps she has changed out of knowledge. Perhaps she is dead. Perhaps she died just after I saw her and that is why her face appears to me so constantly."

That was a dreadful thought and set him gloomy for a space. But the merry beat of his horses' feet, and the rattle and roll of his tarantas, and the sweet air and sunshine sped his fears before long, and he was thinking of her again, alive, and beautiful, and shy, and kind, just as he had seen her that muddy day when she reached out her hand and gave him her cake.

She would be older, of course, but he would know her again — oh, surely, he would know her, no matter how she was changed. He would know her among ten thousand, for her face had been with him year in and year out ever since that first day he saw her.

He had often wondered where that village was and what its name. There were so many villages on the long road, and all so drearily alike, and nothing to recall one more than another except to him. To him there was no village in the world to compare with that

one where little Katenka lived, but he had only caught broken glimpses of it as he trudged, holding on by his mother's gown.

And here, from the darkness of the straggling village street, he had stepped suddenly into a radiance brighter than the sun. From the darkness of the past the child's shy face had glimmered out at him for years; and here, in the sweet face that began to colour under the fervour of his hunger-look, he had found it again — at last.

“Little Katenka!” he murmured, not in doubt or questioning, but in long-delayed and joyful greeting.

And as he looked he saw himself standing outside in the cold once more, caked in sticky black mud from foot to head. His feet were lumps of lead. His little legs were very tired. His little body felt like an empty drum, and something inside him growled and grumbled like fighting beasts. And then, of a sudden, into his dreariness a rosy face pushed through; and to his clamouring emptiness a tiny hand thrust out a hot brown cake; and a chiding voice told him, too late, that he was eating the little one's supper and that she would have none. But the rosy face had smiled on him still, and the hot cake filled him with more than itself, and the icy mud was no longer so cold, nor the road so dreary. In the strength of that cake and the manner of its giving he had gone many days; and in his boyish mind that straggling gray village, whose very name he did not

know, was distinguished from all the other gray villages by the friendly warmth that had shone from the eyes of the child. And the rippling curls that tumbled out from under her little cloth cap were like sunbeams, too, and he never thought of that village as bleak and cold, but as always bright in the sun.

And here were the friendly eyes and the sunny hair, and through the matured beauty of the maid he could trace unerringly the sweet child-face of his dreams.

"Little Katenka!" he said again, and now with a joyous ring in his voice.

"But yes, I am Katia," and her eyes were wide with wonder. "I was Katenka till I grew too big. But who are you? I do not know you."

"And I have known you half my life," and his eyes never left her face. It seemed as if he never could get enough of her. His thirsty eyes drank in the sight of her as a horse sucks in the water after a long journey.

And then, from a corner, there came a movement and the cry of a child, and Katia ran to it and lifted it from its cradle, and stood swaying it with a soothing croon while she still looked at him over it.

"You are not married?" he jerked, and his voice was suddenly hoarse, and she saw that his face had gone strangely white.

"No, I am not married. This is Varia's. Whom should I marry?" she laughed, from which he might have gathered that the village was deficient in eligible

youths. But he had only one thought, and he filled it quickly to the brim.

“Me!”

And she eyed him with fresh surprise but yet with no disfavour. His eyes were straight and true. He was good to look upon. She had no fear of him. In some strange way he knew her, though she did not know him. There was something in his joyful regard of her that she did not understand, but it stirred her strangely.

“I will go for my father,” she said. “They are all in at Dimitri Saxo’s.”

“Wait!” he begged. “Let me tell you! Do you remember — twelve years ago — an exile party for Irkutsk passed by your house? A small boy, thick with mud, begged a crust, and you gave him your supper-cake —”

“Bozhe-moi!” she laughed, through her wonder. “I was not allowed to forget it. Whenever I did a foolishness, they said: ‘What would you? She gave her supper-cake to the mud-boy.’”

“I was the mud-boy, and the face of little Katenka, as she pushed between her father and mother, has never left me. I saw it in the forge, in the trees, in the river, and always in my dreams. All my life I have loved it.”

“You were the boy?” and her face was rosy at his vehemence.

“And now I am a man, and I have found you again at last. And Katenka — Katia —”

“I will bring my mother,” she said hastily, and slipped the sleeping child into its cot and ran out of the door.

## CHAPTER X

SHE was back in a moment with her father and mother and her sister Varia, and whatever she had told them had sufficed to fill their faces with wonder. Katia crept in last of all, and hid behind the others.

"I am Stepan Iline, son of Ivan Iline of Irkutsk," began Stepan.

"Iline who makes the ploughs?" asked Totsin.

He was a man of sixty, with a long, narrow face and straggly gray hair and beard. His eyes were small and quick-glancing, but rather close-set. He had been exiled twenty years before for daring to drive his horse with reins instead of running beside it. Here he drove as he chose.

His wife, Marya Feodorovna, was more generously made. She had a very pleasant, good-humoured face, and it was from her that her daughters got their fine, dark-blue eyes.

Varia had something of Katia in her face, but was several years older. Her baby was only three months old and she was not yet very strong again. She was pale and quiet, and spoke little before the stranger.

"He is my father," said Stepan.

"They are good ploughs."

"Everything we make is good and good work has prospered us. Has Katia told you? I am the mud-boy to whom she gave her supper-cake —"

"Bozhe-moi," said Mrs. Totsin, with a friendly laugh. "But you are grown since then. And you are cleaner, too."

"We had been a year on the road and the roads were mud," he said in extenuation.

"And now," said Totsin, "you are come —"

"Ah, that is another business. I am sent by Paschkin —"

"Ah! — Paschkin!" said Totsin, sourly, with a change of face.

"They say he has a devil," said his wife.

"Is the Devil," corrected Totsin, harshly. "Bring us vodka," to his wife. "Paschkin gives me a bad taste in the mouth. And what does Paschkin want with me?"

"When he passed through here, in haste for Irkutsk, he saw two black horses running on the steppe. He has sent me for them."

"The devil!" said Totsin, and his cup of vodka stopped halfway to his mouth, while he glared over it at Stepan with no friendly look.

"The mission is none of my seeking, I assure you. But none says nay to Paschkin. He came to our forge, called my father to be one of his councillors, and ordered me here, all in a breath. I started next morning an hour after sunrise."



"But — bozhe-moi — my horses!"

"He gives five hundred roubles for them."

"Ah — five hundred roubles! That is not much for two such horses as those," but all the same his little close-set eyes twinkled greedily. "They would be cheap at a thousand. And if only there were three they would be worth a thousand apiece."

"I do not doubt it. But Paschkin fixes his own price, and truly he is not one to bargain with. He hangs men for a word, they say, and sometimes without one."

"And you have brought his money with you?"

"I have brought his money."

"He has faith in you, for sure."

"As you see."

"Five hundred roubles, bozhe-moi, and they are cheap at a thousand!" he grumbled, with a meditative sip of his vodka. "And when would you require them? They are out on the steppe, you see."

"He gave me fifteen, sixteen days. More, if the horses were out on the steppe or the rains came. They are to reach him in good condition."

"And where do you stop?"

"That is for the police to say. I travel for Paschkin."

The motherly eyes had been scanning him closely and had found him good. There was no young man in Selemsinsk, or anywhere in that district, to approach him, — did she not know them all by heart, such as

they were, — and much as one might love one's daughters, their future had to be thought of.

"You could stop here," said Mrs. Totsin, with her eyes on his face. And she saw the light that shot into it at the suggestion.

"But will it trouble you?"

"Nay, you can have Katia's bed and the girls can go together. Varia's man is away to Yeniseisk. She only came for Katia's company. She can go home if needs be."

"If you are sure. I would like it if — but —" stammered Stepan, rosy red through his tan at the thought.

"Yes, you will stop," said she, liking him the better every minute.

And so Stepan found himself next door to heaven that night.

## CHAPTER XI

VISITORS such as this were rare in Selemsinsk, and they all sat up so late talking that at last the chief of police thumped good-humouredly on the door and asked them what mischief they were plotting, so long after all good citizens were in bed.

"I travel for Paschkin," laughed Stepan, as the chief came in and consented to sip a glass of vodka.

"His name covers much, they say. Thank God he is five hundred miles away."

"He has a long arm and a strong one. Our good old Dolgourof was easier to get on with."

"Without a doubt. You had no troubles on the road?"

"None. Paschkin's name was sufficient."

He told them all they could ask about Irkutsk, and expanded on the growth of the city and its riches, and the beauty of the Angara valley and Lake Baikal and its surroundings. And they gave him all the news they had got from passing traders. And Katia sat in a corner listening, and watching Stepan when he was not looking at her, and wondering at it all, and liking him more and more.

And he knew she was there, though she was as quiet as a mouse, and he knew when she was looking at

him, and it was only by most resolute effort that he could keep his eyes off her. And, now and again, when he thought she was not looking, he could not hold his eyes any longer, and then their glances would meet, and Katia's would fall, and her face would redden with confusion at being caught, and she would try not to look at him again for a very long time, and then, when she did take a covert peep, he was sure to be looking at her. And that joyful hunger was still in his eyes; and now she was beginning to understand it.

When Totsin and his wife were in bed that night, she whispered to him, "He wants our Katia."

And Totsin, whose thoughts had been more of his horses than his daughter, and who had seen in Stepan only Paschkin's messenger who had come to take them away, said, "The devil!"

And Stepan? Young Stepan hardly slept a wink that night.

He lay awake turning over and over in his mind the whole amazing matter. And he thanked God, as his mother had taught him, for bringing it about, and was even grateful to Paschkin for his share in it; and that was probably the only occasion on which any man was ever grateful to Paschkin for anything in the whole course of his life.

Amazing, indeed, was the difference the last few hours had made in Stepan's outlook. He shook him-

self and pinched himself at times to make certain he was not dreaming.

He had found his little Katenka! And he knew that if he had been able to follow her growth in his mind through all these years and to forecast her looks, he would have wished her just what she was.

The shy, impulsive, generous child had grown into the modest, warm-hearted maiden. A girl with eyes and face like that could not but be good, and he knew she was as good as she was beautiful.

And here he was in the pretty bird's own nest. He caught his breath at thought of it and went hot all over. It was a sacred place to him — a holy of holies. A bare little sanctuary, in truth, up under the roof, with sloping sides and one small window in the gable, and but roughly furnished, but it was clean as a bone, and sweet and fragrant by her use.

That big black chest held her clothes — the end of a ribbon had got shut outside when she hastily cleared the room for him. A tiny ikon in one corner told of her devotions. Her soft, bare feet trod this well-scrubbed floor. This was her bed. How wonderful she was! How sweet! How beautiful! And her eyes! They set him on fire. And her hair! It was more than ever like the halo of a saint. There never was any girl like her in this world before! He buried his hot face in the pillow and vowed his life to her happiness.

And once a terrible thought took hold of him. Suppose she should die in the night — now, just when he had found her! But he shook it off. She had looked all right when he bade her good night — hale and well and happy, though not without a touch of rosy confusion about her. Perhaps he had looked at her too much. Perhaps she did not like being looked at like that. But, *bozhe-moï*, how could a man help it when she was so wonderfully good to look at?

He wondered if she knew what was in him. He thought she must have seen. It seemed to him that his eyes must have blazed the news to her. He wondered she had not heard his heart thumping her name, — “*Katia, Katia, Katia!*”

But he would go slowly, slowly, so as not to frighten her. He had days before him. He must keep remembering that, though he had known her every day for twelve years, she had known him for but part of a day.

He wondered if there was any other man, and turned cold at the thought. And then he remembered her laughing, “Whom should I have married?” and mused upon it and took heart again.

And once he marvelled briefly at the wonder of so sweet a flower on Totsin’s stem. But there, roses grew among thorns. Her mother had kind eyes, and a good face, and a warm heart, and he decided that *Katia* took after her.

And though he was weary with his long journey, and hardly slept a wink all night, he was hungry for daylight and another sight of his little Katenka in the blushing face of this wonderful new Katia.

## CHAPTER XII

KATIA had on a different dress.

Stepan could not have told you just where the difference came in, but he knew that she looked very much alive and prettier than ever.

Her mother noticed it, but she only smiled to herself.

Vasili Vasilievitch was thinking of his horses and what he would do with his five hundred roubles. In spite of his grumbling at the price, the money would be very useful. Roubles were never too plentiful with him. He was not nearly so smart a business man as he thought himself, and his horse-dealing had not so far done more than provide his family with a fairly comfortable living.

Varia was busy with her baby. She smiled now and then, in a knowing, matronly fashion, at Katia and Stepan, but she had not much to say.

"They are up in the bend of the river," said Totsin, suddenly, overlooking the fact that he was following out a train of thought of which he alone was cognizant. "When shall I bring them in? How long —"

"Paschkin gave me sixteen days, or a day or two more if necessary," said Stepan, thoughtfully. "I came



in five. Bozhe-moi, it took us nearly two months to walk it last time! I could stop three or perhaps even four, if —” and he looked anxiously across at Mrs. Totsin, and gathered the signs of Katia’s face at the same time without looking at it.

“Nu, then! Stop if you can,” said Mrs. Totsin, heartily. “It is a long journey, and we don’t have visitors every day.”

“And I have never been farther than Baikal since we came through here before. I shall be glad to stop if you are sure —” and this time he looked at Katia.

“We shall be glad if you will stop,” she smiled, and Paschkin himself would hardly have moved him after that.

“Will you care to see the horses?” asked Totsin, as he got up to go out.

“Nay, I shall see quite enough of them before I’m done with them. I will rest if I may.”

“Did you sleep?” asked Marya Feodorovna, hospitably.

“I did not sleep much.”

“Da, then! Were you not comfortable? Was the bed —”

“The most comfortable bed I ever saw in my life. But my head was full of thoughts and they would not sleep.”

“So! Well, you will rest during the day. Sit there in the corner by the stove and you will not be in our

way," and she smiled knowingly to herself as she went about her work, and Stepan thought what a nice face she had.

"And what part did you come from?" asked Marya Feodorovna, over her shoulder, as she washed the dishes and passed them on to Katia to dry.

"We are from Kazan."

"Ah, you are of the Russki. So am I. I am from Kostroma, not so very far from your country. But my man is of the Rosniaki. He comes from Voronej. You are tall for a north-countryman."

"It was the transplanting, I think. I am bigger than my father now."

"He must be a good craftsman. We know his name even here."

"He is a good man and so his work is good. He gives his best always."

"That's the way to get a name and make money."

"We are always busy."

"And you help him?"

"Yes, and we have five men besides, and could do with more, but skilled men are not to be found, they have to be trained."

"And your mother? You take after her, I'll be bound. A good son generally means a good mother."

"And a good daughter? There is no one like my mother — unless it might be yourself. She has a warm

heart and a good face, as you have," at which Marya Feodorovna laughed agreeably.

"And you are the only one?" she asked presently.

"I am the only one. There has never been any but me."

"And how did you know the little one when you saw her after all these years?"

"I knew her the moment I saw her face in the light. Did I not now?" he appealed to Katia.

"Truly, you stared at me as if you would eat me," she laughed rosily.

"It was strange you should know her again, for she was only a small thing then, and you had but a glimpse of her. And besides you were not much bigger yourself."

"That was the very best cake I had ever tasted —"

"I made it myself. You shall have another just like it for your supper."

"There never could be another just like it. I mean, to taste just like it. For, you see, I was half starving, and very cold and miserable, and the way was always long and cold. And little Katenka's hot cake, and the way she gave it to me, and her bright rosy face were all such cheer to me that I could think of nothing else. They warmed me up whenever I thought of them, and they made the way short, and took the cold out of the mud. I could see her face again whenever I thought of her, and I kept on thinking of her all the time. And

when we settled down in Irkutsk I saw her face still. When I went into the forge I saw it in the glow of the fire. And I saw it outside in the trees and in the river. It was always with me. And I wondered, as I drove along over the steppe, wherever Katenka's village could be, for they all seemed the same when we were on the road, and I did not even know its name. And then I came to the house here, and as soon as I saw Katia's face in the light I saw little Katenka's face inside it, and it nearly struck me dumb. But I knew her in a moment. Did I not now?" he asked Katia again.

"I thought you were crazy," laughed Katia.

"Bozhe-moi, it was enough to make any one feel a bit crazy," said her mother, heartily, with a well-pleased look at Stepan's eager face and sparkling eyes.

Yes, he was an honest lad, she said to herself, and if it was so that he wanted their girl, she would not be the one to oppose him.

"And you," she said to her daughter, "had you any thought who he was? You did not know him again?"

"But he was all mud when I saw him before, and I could hardly see his face," said Katia, in extenuation.

"It is true. He was truly very muddy. You were holding on to your mother's gown and she had a good face. It made me sorry I had nothing more to give, but the first comers had got all. Why were you sent out?"

"I heard Paschkin ask my father the other day, and

my father said: 'Irkutsk needed men. I took snuff.' And then Paschkin asked him if he still took snuff and he said, 'Yes,' and the Governor named him for his council. It's a queer world."

"Ay, truly! My man was sent out for using reins when he drove, and here if he had a rein to every hair, they would take no notice."

"His horses would," said Stepan, which set Katia laughing more than the saying seemed to warrant.

She was so extraordinarily pretty when she laughed in that way with the abandonment of a child that Stepan wished he could think of something else like that, so that he could make her go on laughing. But if you had asked Katia why she laughed so, she could not have told you. If he had told them anything sad, she would have cried just as readily.

Varia went out with her baby to see her father-in-law, who was lying ill a few doors away. They had all been in there the night before when Katia ran to fetch them.

Katia and her mother busied themselves about the rooms, and Stepan's eyes followed the girl's lissome figure and springing step with rapt delight. Deft of hand, light of foot, graceful as a mountain birch, and sweeter of face even than the little Katenka of his dreams, his heart swelled to overflowing as he watched her.

He wondered, wondered. For his time was so short.

How was it possible that she could care for him? Bozhe-moi, she had only known him a few hours, though

of course he had known her half his life. But the thought of parting from her, now that he had found her, was not to be borne. His heart curdled inside him at the possibility, and the pain was so great that he had to grind his teeth and clench his hands. He could not leave her. He could not. He could not. And, bozhe-moi, he said to himself — he would not.

## CHAPTER XIII

MARYA FEODOROVNA went out on some household affairs, and at last Katia, having done everything that had to be done, and some of it twice over, for the tumult of her feelings which set her to fearing—hoping— Da— she could not tell!—expecting, in any case, that something out of the common might happen if she rested for a moment. For she knew all that was in him as well as if it had been printed on his face, and it was truly sudden, you see.

She had to come to the stove at last to overlook some of her cooking. Her short skirt swung against the leg of his boot. The feel of it shot tingling right up into his heart and on into his brain. It intoxicated him.

He could plunge through a thorn brake in those big boots and feel nothing of it, but the touch of Katia's swinging skirt set his blood jumping.

If Natalie and Nadeja and Masha at home had gone down on their knees and kissed his boot, he would have felt nothing but pity for their foolishness. But the touch of Katia's unconscious skirt against it was enough to thrill him through and through. Da, but it was odd. He could not understand it.

Her face was bent absorbedly over the pot, as if her

mind was intent on it and nothing else. But she knew quite well what was in him, and the little hand that lifted the lid trembled in spite of her, and she bit her lip to keep it quiet.

He could not stand it. His heart felt as if it would burst into a thousand pieces. He jumped up so suddenly that the lid of the pot fell with a clatter.

"Katia! Katia!" he cried, with both his hands stretched eagerly towards her, almost touching her. "I must tell you. My heart is crying out for you. It is sick for you. I have thought of none but you for all these years. Could you trust me? Could you — could you —" and he choked with the very vehemence of his feelings.

But his eyes, and his face, every quivering bit of him, spoke more eloquently than all his words.

For a moment they looked deep into one another's eyes, and Katia knew that she could trust this man to the death, and that she had his whole heart.

And suddenly she was strong again. The trembling had passed. She was uplifted, too. Her heart drew to his. She clasped her hands in his.

"Yes," she said. "I can trust you."

And with a cry he drew her to him and kissed her to his heart's content.

"Do you know what it means?" he asked her at last, gazing eagerly down into the sweet flushed face.

"Yes, I know. You will want me to go with you."



"You are more to me than my father or my mother, or life itself, my Katia. All my whole life shall be for your happiness."

"I will go with you, Stepan Ivanovitch."

"Now, God be thanked for His goodness!" and he kissed her again and again.

And while he was at it Mrs. Totsin came in.

"Ach, so!" said she heartily, and in no way surprised. "So you have come together, you two. I knew you must. It was surely ordered so."

"And you will not say us nay, Marya Feodorovna?" asked Stepan, with his arm round Katia as if he would never let her go again.

"Who shall say nay when God says yea?" said Mrs. Totsin. "All the same, you will have to settle it with Totsin."

## CHAPTER XIV

“**BOЖЕ-МОЇ**, but you have lost no time,” grumbled Vasili when he came in from his expedition after the horses.

“I have none to spare, you see. Needs must when the devil drives — or Paschkin.”

“You will take her with you?”

“Of a surety. I lost her for twelve years. We will part no more this side death.”

“And what are we to do without her?”

“She must have married when the time came. Thank God, it did not come before me! My life would have been but half a life.”

“But to take her away to the other end of the world!”

“It is but five days to Irkutsk.”

“It is the end of the world to some of us. First you take my horses at half their proper price, and now you would take my daughter.”

“It was Paschkin sent me.”

“Paschkin didn’t send you for our Katia.”

“Ay did he, without a doubt, though he did not know it. And —” with a happy laugh — “his very last words to me were, ‘If any man refuse you anything you need, I will hang him from his own lintel.’ And I need

Katia," at which Marya Feodorovna broke also into hearty laughter.

"He is the Devil — that Paschkin!" growled Totsin.

"Put away thy evil humour, Vasili Vasilievitch," said his wife. "This was meant to be, as I told thee last night. The good God led him here without a doubt, and we may not set ourselves against His will."

"Nu, then! If you are all against me —"

And that was how Stepan Iline won Katia Vasilievna for his wife.

## CHAPTER XV

THE days that followed were days of rare delight to Stepan, and not less to Katia, and to all of them days charged with affairs of the greatest moment.

For Katia must not leave her father's house unprovided, and opportunities for shopping were limited.

By an undoubtedly heaven-sent chance, however, there came jogging into the village an old Jew trader, with his wagon load of goods such as the country women loved. He called there in his regular round twice every year, and his coming had always been one of the events of Katia's life. For, even if one could not buy, one could always see, and his packs were treasure-houses of delight — to be thought about and talked about for weeks after he had gone, and to be longed for till he came again. And now — either by instinct or by chance, or led thereto by the same special providence which had brought Stepan Iline straight to her door — the old Jew came just when he was wanted.

He gauged the situation in two minutes and advanced his prices to meet it in one. This, he judged, would hardly be a time — even if the exigencies of the case had permitted of it — to haggle over kopeks, though, in the ordinary course of things, that was a diversion in which

Marya Feodorovna's soul delighted, and she was a master hand at it.

But he might have known Mrs. Totsin after all these years. Time indeed pressed, Katia's hours at home were numbered, and there was much to be done. But, levying uncompromisingly on the purchase-money for the blacks, which Stepan, under the circumstances, did not hesitate to advance on her husband's account, Marya Feodorovna raked over the Jew's packs with an enjoyment she had not experienced since she was a girl.

Many the times she had hung over them with longing eyes, restricting herself to the absolutely necessary, and letting obvious bargains, for which she had no present use, go by with a sigh. But here, for once, she felt she might let herself go. Katia must be furnished. And that wonderful providence which had brought both Stepan Iline and old Peter Krop along just at the right time had not failed also to provide her with means.

Totsin, indeed, attempted a remonstrance in favour of his roubles, but she routed him with a word.

And if old Peter Krop expected her eyes to be as full of love mists as were pretty Katia's, he found himself, for once, mistaken.

Marya Feodorovna prepared herself for battle. She dangled her roubles before his eyes, belittled his judgment as a buyer, made contemptuous hay of his stock in general, and miscalled his choicest morsels. In the

unusual position of a wholesale purchaser for cash, she offered him prices that apparently made his flesh creep and the perspiration run down his beard. The neighbours gathered round to enjoy the fray, and it was only behind closed doors in the seclusion of the house, and after binding her to inviolable secrecy in the matter, that Peter and she at last came to an understanding. And she was so well pleased with herself that she insisted on the Jew partaking of food with them, greatly to the disgust of Vasili Vasilievitch, who saw himself being plundered on all sides, — horses, daughter, roubles, and now food to a Jew, who, if he knew anything about Jews, — and he did, — was without doubt making a profit of fifty per cent at least on all they bought, no matter what he said to the contrary.

And truly, in spite of his goose-flesh and his cold sweats, Peter Krop went on his way chuckling. And so all parties, except Vasili, were satisfied.

The neighbours, to a woman, threw up all but absolutely necessary household matters and came in to help, and for the next two days the Totsin house was a hive of industry and a very parrot-house for chatter. The big samovar was steaming from morning till night, and there was tea enough drunk to float a small ship. And Vasili Vasilievitch betook himself to the house where a withered bush hung over the door, and met there all the other deserted husbands, and came home each night complacently bemused, shaking his head solemnly as

if the problem of life were still beyond him, and then lay down and went quietly to sleep.

And Katia went about among them with a red-rose face and a conscious look, somewhat raised with all this bustle of which she was the cause and centre, but visibly happy, and looking forward with eagerness and wonder to the larger life that had opened so suddenly before her.

Stepan, for his part, lived those days in the clouds. He fetched and carried for them all; handed round tea as if he were promoting a conflagration or helping to quench one; and kept Katia in sight as much as possible, lest any one should run away with her, or any other untoward thing should come to her, and because the very sight of her made him feel twice the man he was at any other time.

So rich and full of the joy of life was he, that it lighted his eyes, and shone in his face, and set every other girl in the village envying Katia, and made the more experienced married ones think back to the times when they too had seen a man's face like that and for them.

And some of them nodded knowingly and smiled as they bit their threads, and some sighed quietly to themselves and said in their hearts: "Ay, ay, it's good to be young. They've found their bit of heaven, but they'll bump on the earth again as we have done."

And Varia, from her experience of a year of married life, gave her sister copious matronly hints on the treat-

ment of husbands, but acknowledged, somewhat forlornly, that this radiant young giant from the east was different from her own absent Dmitri, who was kind enough and good-humoured, but easy-going and indolent, and not likely ever to cut a very deep streak in the world.



## CHAPTER XVI

ON the fourth day they were married, in the little white church with its green needle of a spire, and every soul in the village came to the wedding.

It was a great occasion, and the old priest with his long white hair and patriarchal beard gave them much fatherly counsel, and finally pronounced them man and wife, and Stepan gave his blushing wife the marital kiss and thanked God with all his heart for the gift of her.

Totsin was there with as good a grace as his wife had been able to instil into him; but it was Marya Feodorovna herself who had seen to all the details, — the candles, the rings, the crowns, the carpet, the hot wine and water, everything just as it should be, and as it would have been in the old country. For her big motherly heart had taken Stepan into it. She liked him better every hour. Something within her, which was all her true self, told her that he was the right man, and she gave her daughter to him without a moment's misgiving.

Then, as far as the house would hold, everybody crowded in to the wedding feast, which Marya Feodorovna and Katia and Varia and some of the neighbours had been up till daylight preparing.

And soon after midday the whole village was waving and shouting farewells and good wishes, and the younger folks running after them for many last words, as they drove away at a gallop with their merry bells clashing and many a backward look and wave. And Paschkin's mettlesome blacks, prancing white-eyed in the rear, wondered, perchance, why the village folk were so mighty glad to be rid of them.

"We will come again to see you all," was Stepan's last word, as he shook the reins. And little any of them thought how next they would come.

For they lived in the days of Paschkin.

It was only when the dust had settled, and the very last far-away clash of the bells had died, that Katia's mother turned away and went into a room by herself and had a hearty cry, which did her a world of good. For, *bozhe-moi*, one does not give away such a girl as Katia every day, and, besides, she had been working full stretch for many days on end, and she felt like a rag.

Stepan, looking round into his wife's face, found tears on her long lashes, and with one glance ahead to see that all was clear, he bent and kissed them away.

"Wilt find another mother over there, my Katia," he said quickly. "And she will love thee as thine own. She has been urging me to marry for long enough, — this girl and that, — no matter which, only she longed to see me married. And I had no heart for any of them, and now I know why. It was

all waiting for thee. Thou wilt have two mothers and two fathers and a husband. Art rich, my little one. And she is the best mother in the world, like thine own, and her only wish will be to make thee happiest of the happy. And for me, God has been so good to me that I cannot but wonder what I have ever done to deserve it all. He shall have of my best and thou, also, core of my heart!" and he drove his three with one strong hand, and slipped the other arm round her and drew her close.

He had thought the woods wondrously beautiful as he came, but now they blazed beyond all knowledge, fiery crimson and flaming yellow, with matted undergrowths of dark unchanging green; and still, in the hollows of the steppe and the swampy places of the woods, the wild flowers lingered lovingly as though waiting to see them pass. And when they reached their stopping-place for the night, Katia was almost lost among the blooms he had gathered and piled in her lap.

"Nu, then, hast done thine errand for Paschkin?" said their host, looking from Katia to the blacks.

"Those are for Paschkin," said Stepan. "This is my wife."

"Hast lost no time on the business."

"When one travels for Paschkin, you understand," said Stepan, with a joyous laugh, and when he had led Katia into the house, he saw to the safe bestowal of Paschkin's horses, which the man came along to admire

while his wife admired Katia inside and plied her with many questions.

Day after day, with full hearts, they sped across the steppe and threaded the hills. And now, among other discoveries he found that Katia could sing like an angel, and her clear, sweet voice chimed better with the bells than his did; but he must always sing, too, because he could not help it.

And so, right joyously, they swept along towards Irkutsk; and never, sure, since time began, were hearts more sweetly tuned to love, nor ever world more beautiful. For is not all the world made all anew for every pair of happy lovers?

It was all so new and delightful to her — to be made so much of, she who all her life had been ministering to others. In everything to be his first and chief concern; to be so carefully wrapped and folded against the cold; to be half buried each day in the only gifts he could find to give her, the flowers and leaves which seemed to blaze the brighter for their coming end.

“Art as careful of me as if I were a baby, or the six-year Katenka of thy dreams,” she laughed, at their first hill, when he would have had her sit still while he got out and walked.

“Art more to me than all the babies in the world, and for me there is but one Katenka,” he said, with a look that let his heart through.

But she sprang out of her wrappings like a hare out of her forme, and took the road beside him. And they went up the hill with his arm round her waist and hers round his, and found it good, and vowed that all life's hills they would climb in that same way. And all their five horses watched them with rolling eyes and craning necks, for never had they seen grown people act like this before, and fine tales they had to tell that night when they stood with the rest in their stalls.

Without a doubt they would have been content to go on like this for ever, wandering through a dreamland of delight with all their wants provided for. But Paschkin waited, and all roads end.

And when, on the seventh day, they struck the Angara, and saw Tunka's shining crown above the lower hills, Katia grew sober and thoughtful. For the time for new meetings was drawing near. She could not but wonder how Stepan's mother and father would greet their son's unknown and unexpected wife, and she shrank somewhat from the ordeal.

Stepan saw it in her instantly and rallied her gaily, enlarging so upon their goodness of heart and desire for his marriage, that he succeeded in almost reassuring her.

He had matters of his own to think of also, but he would not let them cloud his high spirits.

He had succeeded in his errand, and Paschkin could

not but be satisfied. The blacks were there, safe and sound, and in excellent condition, and this was the sixteenth day since he left home.

He must deliver the horses to Paschkin before he went home or did any other thing. And that entailed taking Katia to the Governor's house — and possible explanations.

Could Paschkin find fault with him on Katia's account?

Hardly, he thought, since she had in no way jeopardised the success of his journey. But then — Paschkin was Paschkin, and one never knew.

However, he would not harbour forebodings. He had done his duty and Paschkin's bidding — and he had got Katia.

They swung across the pendulum ferry, and every man aboard the boat gathered round the blacks with loud, admiring comments.

Then they were on the dusty road again, and at last they drew up at the Governor's door.

Paschkin was away, had been away a week, with all his available forces and such unwilling volunteers as he could impress at short notice, giving a lesson in deportment to a tribe of Mongols who had crossed the border south of Baikal and raided his territory.

Stepan decided to keep the blacks in his own hands until he could deliver them into Paschkin's, and drove gaily home in great content.

## CHAPTER XVII

KATIA'S timid heart needed not to have wasted one tiniest flutter in doubt of her welcome. And deepest thought and most skilful of diplomacy could not have paved her way to their hearts as did Stepan's ingenuous introduction.

"Matushka," he cried, as he sprang out of the tarantas and flung his arms about his mother's neck and kissed her heartily, "here is one thou shouldst love," and he helped the blushing Katia down and led her in. "Dost remember the little Katenka who gave me her hot supper-cake one black day on the road long ago?"

"Bozhe-moi! Do I not?" said his mother, with kindling eyes and face full of expectancy and admiration.

"This is she, and we are wedded."

And Katia found herself in as loving an embrace as her own mother could have given her. And when they unlocked, the eyes of both were full of happy tears.

"Now I am glad. I am glad," said Marya Petrovna, and her voice told it. "In all the world thou couldst not have chosen one to please me better, my son."

"Hast often wondered why I waited and would none of thy Irkutsk maids, little mother. 'Twas for this,

without doubt, though I did not know it properly myself."

"It is a marvel," said his mother, glowing upon them.

And to Katia: "He never ceased to think of thee, I know, for I have heard him whisper 'Katenka' in his sleep and smile at thought of thee. I can see the little Katenka in thy face —"

"I saw it the moment my eyes lighted on her," said Stepan, joyously.

And then his father came hurrying in from the forge, and all the wonderful news had to be told over again, and he gave her greeting as hearty as his wife had done, if somewhat more restrained.

And Katia's heart was satisfied. She had left father and mother and home for Stepan's sake. But here was no loss, for she had found the new love no whit less warm than the old.



## CHAPTER XVIII

WHILE they housed the blacks with care, Iline gave his son brief word of matters that had occurred in his absence.

"He is rightly called the Devil, this Paschkin," he said tersely. "But it is not right that such a man, or any man, should have such powers. When he is thwarted, he is no longer a man. He is a wild beast. He is a devil. His council is a farce to make other men bear the burden of his doings. Ostroff is on the way to Yakutsk —"

"To Yakutsk!" gasped Stepan. For Yakutsk was the uttermost hell of exile, where men mouldered in the icy cold of filthy native huts, sans friends, sans hope, sans everything. And Ostroff had been their friend.

"And the little Nadeja?"

Iline shook his head. "God knows! — and maybe the devil, and without doubt — Paschkin."

"And why?"

"It was in the matter of the tax. Ostroff stood against the increase. He is on the road to Yakutsk, and the tax is raised."

"Then, under Paschkin, one may not think."

"Only as Paschkin thinks."

"And you?"

"I do not think out loud. I am too old for another transplanting."

"Maybe he will come to an end among these Mongols."

"Life would be the brighter, but —" and he shook his head unhopefully. "He has forced some to go with him, — Biritzef, and Pascal, and Anukof."

"And Anukof but newly married," jerked newly-married Stepan.

"He is gone all the same. Paschkin's hand is heavy. He wants us to feel it and lie quiet under his heel."

"He is the Devil, as they say. The fear of him is abroad. I found it everywhere as I journeyed."

"The day you left he killed a Cossack with his own hand. The man was insolent, he said. He struck him with his fist just here, —" on the temple, — "and he went down like an ox."

"Life will be none too easy while he lives," said Stepan, with a gloomier face than he had worn for years, for now he had a mighty stake in life.

"We must go warily and give him no occasion against us," said his father, quietly.

## CHAPTER XIX

It was another ten days before Paschkin returned from his chastisement of the marauders. He did it so effectually that there was no likelihood of incursion in that direction for a generation at least.

As soon as Stepan heard he had come, he hastened to rid himself of his weighty charge.

The blacks were in splendid condition, and looked wondrously fine as he led them to the Governor's house.

Paschkin came out to see them at once.

"I was just about to send for thee, Iline," he growled. "What hast been doing with my horses?"

"Keeping them safe against your Excellency's return, so that you should be assured I had quitted myself well."

"Hast ridden or driven them?" while his keen eye roved over the jetty skins.

"They have neither been ridden nor driven since they came into my hands, Excellency."

"And how long did you take?"

"I was back here on the sixteenth day, Excellency."

"You did better than you feared," said Paschkin, with a growling laugh. "Who was the owner?"

"One Totsin, who deals in horses."

“And he took the price?”

“He vowed they were worth double, Excellency, but — he took the price,” at which Paschkin’s grim laugh growled again.

“And hadst no difficulties on the road? None aspiring to the noose?”

“None, Excellency. Your Excellency’s name sufficed.”

And Paschkin regarded young Stepan favourably and as one upon whom he could rely.

## CHAPTER XX

KATIA found her new home all that Stepan had pictured it, and more.

Over and above the great fact of Stepan himself and his love for her, which, far from waning, seemed to grow with the months, she found here greater comfort than Selemsinsk had ever been able to afford her.

For Vasili Totsin was not the man to make any great success of life. If at times he did well in his bargaining, and managed to overreach some one of those with whom he dealt, he himself was subject to similar treatment; and if he had the freedom of the steppe for his horses, he was also thereby open to strokes of ill luck from prowlers on four legs and on two. And, finally, from the very nature of his business, he was not accustomed to the discipline of that hard and regular work which braces a man mentally, morally, and bodily.

There is something, surely, in the clang of hammer on anvil, in the wielding of the sledge, in the straight delivery of honest blows, which draws out and builds up the best that is in a man. A smith is rarely a rogue.

And so Katia found a somewhat ampler atmosphere in her new home, and bloomed in it as a flower transplanted to a richer soil.

Stepan's mother, Marya Petrovna, rejoiced in her more and more, and made no concealment of it. The desire of her life was like to be fulfilled, and she gave her new daughter fullest entrance to the warmth of her large, warm heart. She would not hear of them living apart. The house was large enough for them all, — ay, and for children, too, she laughed happily, — so they lived together in great content, and Katia and Marya Petrovna shared the household duties between them.

There was no happier home in all Irkutsk in those days than that green-shuttered house by the busy forge. Since his transplanting Ivan Iline had been more given to thought and hard work than to speech. Since his unwished-for appointment to Paschkin's council the faculty of silence had grown upon him.

He gauged the position clearly. Paschkin was all powerful. Opposition was futile. The utmost one could hope for was to escape notice and be left in peace. It was not perhaps heroic, but it was natural. He had suffered one violent uprooting. He had no smallest desire for another.

Honest and unremitting work had brought with it a certain measure of prosperity. His son was happily married. He delighted in Katia as much as his wife did, though he showed it less. He was perfectly happy and contented. But he knew that they, and all the rest, lived in a tiger's cage, and that their happiness might be shattered any moment by a stroke of the tiger's claw.

## CHAPTER XXI

In the compassing of his own ends and the attainment of his own objects in life, Paschkin knew no scruples.

He had crept upward until he could climb; but once his foot was on the ladder, and he had shown at Petersburg what he was made of, he had climbed rapidly, and was now very near the top.

In Irkutsk he was absolute, and all men bent before him — almost. Wine of the richest, and in quantity unlimited, was his to command. If he chanced upon a horse that rivalled his own, he — acquired it. Women — ah, there he had checks in Irkutsk such as he had not met with elsewhere, and it was in that respect that his absolutism suffered flaws.

In his tigerish, capricious, masterful way, he could be almost winning, this conscienceless Paschkin. To some women it had appealed to have their favours sought by one before whom all men quailed — forgetting, or purposely closing their eyes to the undisputable fact that tiger is tiger still, though he sheathe his claws and play and purr.

For a very long time Stepan, in common with many another, went in fear lest Paschkin should cast eyes on his wife and so bring trouble. For, in the last

extremity, he — and many another — would not hesitate one moment to sacrifice everything for those they loved.

And so Paschkin — absolute as he was, and terrifying — learned some lessons, though the cost was heavy.

Their friend Anukof had been taken by Paschkin to help chastise the Mongols. He had been left chafing on the frontier in a small command. Ill news flies wide, however. One day Anukof came home, mud-stained, wild-eyed, his post deserted. Home! He found his home broken up, his young wife gone.

Paschkin heard of his arrival, but he was no coward. He went about as usual, but guarded, and on his guard. Nevertheless, as he drove in his sledge one twilight, a man flung himself in front of the horses, grasped the shafter's nose till it reared and squealed, and in the confusion another man dashed at Paschkin and drove a long knife through his furs deep into his breast.

“Pound him to death,” growled Paschkin to his Cossacks, through the blood in his throat — “and the other!”

And when they passed on with the wounded man, two bodies, battered out of all knowledge with the butts of muskets, lay in the snow, — Anukof and his wife's father.

That was lesson the first. But Paschkin was ill to teach.

Twice again, with intervals given to recovery and



subsequent backsliding, similar things happened. Then Paschkin recognised the temper of the men of Irkutsk, and learned a measure of outward prudence in certain directions; and those who died won a measure of immunity for the rest.

But the curbing of Paschkin in one direction, through the imminence of death at the hand of outraged husband or father or brother, had but the effect of stimulating his vicious caprice in others. His absolutism knew no bounds. Men's lives and liberties were of no account with him. When the mood was on him, and always when he was thwarted, or deemed himself so, he dealt with men as a headstrong child with its toys — smashed them and flung them away.

The wonder was that he was permitted to live, either by the men of Irkutsk or a just God. But live he did, and prospered in his way, and spread himself like a green bay tree.

In Petersburg he was esteemed a model governor. His province was quiet, his contribution to the ever-gaping treasury always prompt and satisfactory — a vast improvement on the easy-going Dolgourof.

How Paschkin gathered the tribute — what agonies and sweatings of blood the tale of roubles might represent — was nothing to them. Money was the life-blood of the empire, as represented by the bureaucrats at headquarters, and the empire must live, no matter who died in the process.

And custom inures men to any environment. The men — and by degrees and in time even the women — of Irkutsk came to regard Paschkin as a natural evil, like the plague or the fever, to be suffered as best one might.

Men live on the slopes of Etna and Vesuvius, and eat and drink and are merry; and if the mountain awake and spout fire and devour of their company, the rest build anew on the same spot and live on as before. So with the men of Irkutsk.

## CHAPTER XXII

IVAN ILINE suffered mightily in spirit by reason of his appointment to Paschkin's council.

The instinctive respect of the moujik for those in authority, however brutally misused, and still more the bitter remembrance of his own previous uprooting, inclined him to patient endurance. Resistance had but one ending. His chilled blood was often on the boil, but he thought of his wife, and of Stepan and Katia, and kept a stolid face, though it was bitter hard work at times.

His business prospered, but he would not have it prosper unduly lest it become a mark for envy. They lived very simply, but in all comfort and content, and the house was a happy one, though it stood on the slope of a volcano.

Within a year of Stepan's marriage, Marya Petrovna's cup was filled to overflowing by the arrival of a daughter to the happy Katia. She was declared by all to be the very image of what her mother must have been at the same age, — the same blue eyes and fair hair, which would both grow darker, the very same nose and mouth, the mothers declared, though Stepan searched the crumpled rose leaf of a face hopefully in

vain, and vowed they were right to please them, trusting that time would add grace to his vision.

They named her Katia, of course, and called her little Katenka, and she filled all their hearts. Her grandmother, in particular, worshipped her, and vowed there never had been such another since her own little Stepan was born. Had not her heart hungered for this for years? And now the long-pent love spent itself unstintedly on the little one, and Katia would laughingly declare that Marya Petrovna grudged her the use of her own baby. And, truly, Marya was only perfectly happy when it was in her arms or on her knee.

Meanwhile the affairs of the State rolled ponderously on, grinding some to powder and leaving empty places, maiming others, spilling still others into outer darkness.

But so far calamity had passed Iline by. He almost dared to hope at times that evil fortune was satisfied with his former undoing and required no more of him. Nevertheless he walked warily and suffered all things in unmoved silence.

Paschkin, by reason of his silence and quiet endurance of evil, had come to regard him as a man of prudence and sagacity. Iline rarely spoke and never thwarted him. What better councillor could an autocrat desire?

So, through the very qualities of self-restraint and self-effacement which had commended him to the

Governor, that which he had thereby sought to escape came upon him.

The largest single contribution to the Irkutsk tribute came from the Verkinsk silver mines. It was an important item to the exchequer.

Under Dolgourof it had never failed to come — sooner or later; though at times the delay had been so great that a further amount was due before the former one was paid.

Verkinsk lay six hundred miles away to the north, in a difficult mountainous country. Impassable roads, and unrestrainable rivers, to say nothing of occasional roving bands of natives, had palliated all delays, until Paschkin came.

On the first default, Paschkin gave the authorities in Verkinsk to understand clearly that he and Dolgourof were built on entirely different lines. He threatened, if their laxity could find no other cure, to hang one of their number for each day the convoy was in arrears.

The second half-yearly amount arrived a week before its time, and Paschkin chuckled grimly. The next was now a week overdue and Paschkin was furious. If it did not arrive in a day or two, there would be no directors of mines left in Verkinsk.

But Paschkin was not of a waiting temper. He cast round among his councillors for the best man-for his purpose, and each man shrank within himself, and

blessed his holy angels when the baleful eye passed him by.

"You, Iline," he decided. "You are doer, not talker. You shall be Paschkin at Verkinsk and hang whom you will. Right man or wrong, it will smarten the rest. You will start at once, within the hour. You will make all speed to Verkinsk and inquire into the delay. The convoy may have started. You may pass it on the road. No matter. It is seven days behind time, and by my word seven of them should hang — and shall, if you so decide. It will take you ten days to go and ten to return. I give you ten days there. Whomsoever, after inquiry, you hang will hang for five days as a lesson to the rest, and you will bring back the heads of those you hang, for my satisfaction."

A hideous errand and full of risks — and those of the road the smallest. But there was no escape from it. Departure held chances. Refusal was tantamount to a death-warrant.

So Ivan Iline went heavily home while Paschkin got ready his papers.

"What is it, my man?" asked Marya Petrovna, anxiously, at sight of her husband's face.

"Paschkin orders me to Verkinsk to inquire into the delay in the convoy."

"Bozhe-moi — Verkinsk!" she cried aghast. "That is a journey! When?"

"Now."

And she and Katia, with little Katenka cooing in the crook of her arm, began his instant preparations for the road.

He went into the forge to speak to Stepan about the work in his absence.

"Could I not go in your place?" asked Stepan instantly when he heard.

"Nay, my son, Paschkin would not. Nor would I. I go to hang men, by his orders —"

"But you will not," said Stepan, incredulously.

"I am to bring back their heads as proof."

"He is a devil," said Stepan, fervently. "And we are in his hands."

"And God's," said his father.

"God is in heaven and the Tzar is very far away. Which horses do you take?"

"The bay and the roan. Paschkin's name will procure me others."

"Without doubt," said Stepan, in the recollection of his own travelling on Paschkin's business. "But, all the same, it's a terrible journey. I will at all events go with you."

"Nay, they will need you here. If any ill comes to me —"

"God help us!" said Stepan, hotly. "If any ill comes to you, I will —"

"You will look after your mother and your wife and the child," said his father, quietly.

And within the hour he was gone.

## CHAPTER XXIII

THE days passed and they followed him in their hearts.

They were anxious days, and their happiness was clouded. For, though six hundred miles were of no very great account in that land of illimitable distances and unlimited time; and though ten days' travel, under reasonable conditions, would compass them easily, the six hundred miles to Verkinsk bristled with dangers, — of the road, which in places was not; of the rivers, which were; and of the roving bands of half-civilised Tunguses whose cupidity no indefinite fears of possible punishment could restrain.

On the tenth day they said, "He should be about there."

But each anxious heart whispered to itself, "If no ill has befallen him." And Marya Petrovna's thoughts wandered gloomily at times, even when her arms rejoiced in the feel of little Katenka.

Stepan and Katia kept cheerful faces for her sake, but there was a weight on their hearts which would not lighten till Iline should appear in the doorway.

On the twelfth day the Verkinsk convoy arrived, and their hearts beat hopefully at the thought that he might have returned with it.



Stepan hurried off to see. He found two of the leaders dangling like horrible tassels from the projecting eaves of the Governor's house. They had had nothing whatever to do with the delay in the starting of the convoy, but they were here, and the culprits were in Verkinsk. They had fallen into the hand of Paschkin, and the opportunity of impressing the rest with the weight of it was not to be missed. The story would reach Verkinsk.

The others were trembling in their boots and their wits were troubled. Stepan questioned them anxiously, one after another, but could get no word of his father. There was choice of routes in places, some being judged less precarious than others for the laden telegas. They might have passed him on some such loop. He would probably have chosen the quickest with his light tarantas. They spoke briefly of much water out, and snow among the hills.

The snow might help him, Stepan thought, if only it lay deep enough. He could change his tarantas for a sledge and make better way. Nevertheless he would have liked news, and it was all he could do to build a hopeful report at home on so slight a foundation.

On the twentieth day they said, "He is starting for home," and tried their best to believe it. But they avoided looking into one another's eyes lest their own should betray them, and Marya Petrovna's motherly face grew somewhat pinched in spite of herself.

Then time came when hope grew in them again, and they said, "In two days he will be here."

Then: "He should be here to-day, but if he is not, there is no need to be anxious. It is a long journey, and the roads are bad."

But the day passed and they could do no work. They could only look out for him, all day long, and wait, and strive to keep their hearts from sinking and their faces from betraying their fears.

They had a feast ready for him, to make good the discrepancies of the road. But it was wasted. He did not come, and they had no heart for it.

They went to bed saying: "He will come to-morrow. It would have been really surprising if he had come to-day."

But they none of them slept, not even little Katenka, for she was cutting a tooth.

And when the next night came, and still no news of the traveller, Marya Petrovna's face was gray and drawn, and she had no words even for little Katenka. If she had opened her mouth it was a sob that would have come out, so she pinched her lips and kept it in her heart.

And the next day passed, and the next, and now they had only fears to brood upon. They had done their best to keep alive their little sparks of hope, but their lamps were empty and the last sparks died.

"I go to Paschkin," said Stepan, abruptly, on the fifth

day, and he went, with set and sombre face. The women looked at one another, and fell on one another's necks and wept. For the truth was out and fear was upon them.

CHAPTER XXIV

"Ах, Stepan Ivanovitch, it is thou! What of thy father?" growled Paschkin, when Stepan gained audience of him at last.

"We are beginning to fear for him, Excellency."

"Fear? Fear what?"

"We know not, Excellency. But he has not come."

"He has overpassed his time. But the roads are bad and the water is out, they say. We will give him two more days."

"And if he does not come —"

"Well?"

"I would go seek him, Excellency."

"Seek him where?"

"Between here and Verkinsk."

"Da, it is a long road! But thou art a great traveller. Well, thou canst go."

"And your Excellency will give me authority for the road?"

"Come in two days," growled Paschkin, and Stepan went heavily home to make his preparations for the journey.

"Must thou go, Stepan?" asked Katia, white-faced, and shadowy about the eyes, when he told her that he was



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“What can I else, little Katenka?” he said, smoothing her hair as she clung to him as though she would not let him go. “He may be lying sick at Verkinsk, or somewhere on the road. Some ill has befallen him or he would be here. To know even the worst will be better than not to know.”

“Yes, thou must go,” she said, with desperate resignation. “Thy mother’s heart is eating itself with forebodings. But thou wilt use every care, Stepan? If thou should’st not return —” and her voice broke in a sob.

“I will use every care, little one, and thou must cheer the mother while I am away.”

“Little cheer will I have myself till I see thy face again,” she said forlornly. And he knew it must be so, yet felt that his duty was to go.

The two days passed in added gloom, and on the third Stepan started on his journey, with Paşchkin’s authority for horses where they were to be had, and as companion young Feodor Sabine out of the forge.

It left them very short-handed there, only three men and old Paul who acted as foreman, where seven were now none too many a rule. But Feodor had grown up with Stepan, and this was a journey on which one’s life, and the lives of those who were dearer than one’s own, might depend on the mettle of one’s companion.

Katia clung to her husband at the last as though she repented her submission to duty. He put her into his

mother's arms and kissed both their streaming faces again and again, and the last thing he saw was little Katenka merrily waving a pink-sucked thumb at him over their bowed heads.

And when the sound of his bells had died away, the sorrowful mothers knelt before the image in the corner, and prayed brokenly for his safe return — more they scarcely dared to ask. And little Katenka pointed the pink-sucked thumb over her mother's shoulder at the holy image, and said, as she had been taught, "God!"

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## CHAPTER XXV

FOR seven days Stepan and his companion were able to follow the trail from house to house where Iline had changed his horses.

At the first stop they found the bay and the roan with which he started, and took them on to the next stage. But their progress was slow, for many times each day they came on places where destruction lay in wait for an unwary driver, or one bent on speed before all things. And each such place they searched with care, and hearts full of foreboding, only to find when they reached the next house that he had arrived there safely, and had gone on with fresh horses which had never been returned.

As they neared Verkinsk, Stepan's heart began to rise somewhat, in the hope that they would find him at the mines, lying sick maybe, or delayed through some accident. It was certain he had never come back this way.

But the end of the eighth day put an end to their hopes. No such traveller had passed there. No horses had been furnished. Somewhere between these last two houses Ivan Iline had disappeared.

Till late into the night they discussed the matter with their host. He had heard already of the summary

hanging on the convoy leaders, and the dread of Paschkin was upon him. He was entirely at their service and an honest fellow to boot.

"It's a bad course at best, is this," he told them. "Not nearly so bad now, though, with the snow so thick, as it was a month ago when the water was out. They take to runners two stages back before we do here, because the snow lies up there, and here it's all water till it freezes. When the water's out you go for miles with it up to your horses' bellies, and if you don't know the road, there are traps in plenty. Bozhe-moi, he may be halfway to the sea by now!" — which struck chill on their hearts.

In the morning he turned out with them, and they searched anxiously along the river banks for many miles downwards. But the river was frozen for thirty feet out from either bank, and the black water rolled sluggishly between like an endless procession of the dead. It crept on and on remorselessly. Those frozen shelves and creeping black waters might hide the secrets of a thousand lives and deaths throughout all time.

"Voi!" said the farmer at last. "It is all no good. He is gone without doubt. You will see him no more. Will you go on?"

"Yes, I will go, though there is no good in going. I must be able to tell Paschkin that he never reached Verkinsk," and they went on, making perfunctory inquiry as they went, but learning nothing.



Arrived at Verkinsk he went straight to the Governor, and then to the chief of police, and received from both the cold welcome of an intruder. They could only tell him that his father had never reached Verkinsk.

The head men at the mines would hardly open their mouths to him. The fear and hatred of Paschkin lay heavy on them all.

It was only with very great difficulty that Stepan set their suspicions at rest, and made them understand that his reasons for detesting the Governor were fully as great as their own. He gloomily confirmed their belief in Paschkin's bedevilment, and heartily agreed with them that his place was among the heathen, or better still, as one of them growled, among the dead.

But they could give him no news of his father. They had heard that one had been sent by Paschkin to punish them for delay in the convoy, and they had been living in fear ever since. But none such had come, and they had begun to hope it was only a rumour. At sight of Stepan they had taken him for the messenger of the Iron Hand and treated him accordingly.

"I feared he might lay some such duty on me," said Stepan, "and he is an ill man to counter. He did not; but if you will be advised by me you will see your convoy well on its way before its time in future. If you do, Paschkin will not trouble you. If you do not, he will certainly take toll of your heads."

They began volubly to explain their difficulties.

"Paschkin hangs men first and hearkens to excuses afterward," he said, and they took it to heart.

He questioned them keenly and at odd times, for the idea came into his head that they might have got wind of his father's errand and waylaid him on the road. But he found nothing to confirm so villanous a suggestion, and the men themselves lent no colour to it. And, satisfied at length that his father had come to sudden calamity between the seventh and eighth stages, he started on his return home.

At the seventh stage he paid the man for the horses which had never been returned to him, and on the night of the twenty-eighth day he and Feodor were back in Irkutsk, having spent twenty-five days on the road and three in Verkinsk.

## CHAPTER XXVI

MARYA PETROVNA and Katia Vasilievna welcomed Stepan as one returned from the dead. Their joy at sight of him lessened indeed their grief at the news he brought.

All the time he had been away their minds had been numb with fear lest they should be equally widowed and wholly bereft. They had grown almost accustomed to the thought of Ivan Ivanovitch's death. But the fear lest Stepan should follow him by the same road had frozen their hearts.

And so, though there was sadness of loss among them, there was also joy of recovery; and the happiness of being safely together again after many perils exceeded all else.

They sat long about the stove, that first night, and Stepan told them all there was to tell of him who was gone, which amounted to so very little, and that mostly supposition, — and of their journeying, of the wild country they had passed through, and of Verkinsk and its silver mines, and the chained men who toiled in them.

Marya Petrovna sat silent and sad through it all, and when he had ended she said quietly, "May God

requite it all to Paschkin, for he sent my man to his death."

On the morrow Stepan hastened to acquaint the Governor with the ill result of his quest.

Paschkin's dark face was knitted in a frown when he entered. The weak joint in the armour of the man who rules by fear is that he suspects every man and can trust none. Paschkin's mind, strong to brutality as it was, had many perplexities. He scowled unrememberingly, and Stepan saw that for the moment he had no recollection of him and the errand on which he had been.

"I am returned from Verkinsk, Excellency," he said quietly.

"Ah — the young Iline! Well — and your father? You have brought him with you, and the heads of those sluggards at Verkinsk?"

Stepan shook his head. "He never reached Verkinsk, Excellency —"

"Not? Bozhe-moi, where did he go?"

"To his death, Excellency. He changed horses at the seventh stage. He never reached the eighth. The waters were out and we found no trace of him."

"And the horses?"

"Nor of the horses, nor of the men who were with him, Excellency. We searched, with the men of the country, but we found nothing."

"So you came home."

"I went on to Verkinsk, Excellency, to make sure and leave nothing undone—"

"Ah!" with a savage gleam. "You have brought me those heads—"

"I had no such instructions, Excellency. I went to seek my father—"

"Fool!" stormed Paschkin. "To be there on the spot and leave the work undone! You knew your father's business, and that he had failed to carry it out. Could your thick head not stumble to the thought of doing what he was to do, and what you knew I wanted done?"

Stepan took grip of himself and kept a steady face and his eyes on the ground.

"Away! I gave thee credit for brains, but thou art but a lout like the rest," and Stepan bowed, and got out as quickly as he could, thankful for no worse a reception, and in no wise troubled by Paschkin's contempt of his abilities. For Paschkin's despisal was more like to make for a quiet life than his approbation.

And, thereafter, as the result of much consideration of the matter, whenever they came in contact, Stepan did his utmost to assume a stupidity which was not in him, and for a time it answered well and saved him many troubles.

For the dread of every man in Irkutsk was to be chosen by the Governor for his council, and never was

honour more strenuously avoided. For service meant responsibility without power, bullyings and brow-beatings without the possibility of reply, coercion within the council, and obloquy without. But refusal to serve entailed still more certain suffering, and so men served Paschkin — much as a flock of sheep might assist at the deliberations of a wolf.

The unanimity of their agreement with his ideas was wonderful, but, under the circumstances, not surprising. The mere hint of a divergence of opinion set the angry jaw working and the hot blood boiling in the dark red face. Every proposition his Excellency made was carried, as a rule, without discussion or a dissentient voice. A more homogeneous and unanimous council never existed.

Stepan applied himself to his business quietly and diligently, and cautiously avoided anything that might bring him to the Governor's notice.

They lived simply but lacked nothing. The tragic disappearance of her husband cast a shadow on Marya Petrovna which only death would lift. She aged rapidly and brooded on her sorrow. Life had lost its flavour for her. The only solace left her was the loving solicitude of Stepan and Katia; her only joy the little Katenka, who made her her confidante and playfellow, and grew more like her mother every day.

They did everything for the stricken one, and strove

their best to brighten her days. But the blow had been a mortal one, and the long anxiety in which it was wrapped had worn down her spirit.

She came through another winter, however, but the short spring and sudden heat of the summer seemed to sap her strength.

She was sitting in her armchair inside the room one day while little Katenka played and prattled in and out of the sunshine and the open door.

"Art thou cold, matushka?" babbled little Katenka, looking up into the gray, lined face. She always used the endearing "little mother" to her mother and grandmother alike, and her father was always "papasha."

"Yes, my darling — cold."

"You should get up and run like me. I am never cold because I run."

"Little feet, little feet, so cold, so cold," and the worn hands chafed feebly against one another, as though a pair of little ice-cold muddy feet were between them needing to be warmed.

"See me run. I can run quick," and little Katenka's fat little legs hustled her through the doorway so quickly that they tangled up outside and she fell on her nose and wailed aloud.

Her mother ran out of the inner room and picked her up and soothed her. But nothing would satisfy little Katenka but her grandmother's never-failing kiss of consolation as well.

So they went babbling to her chair. But for the first and last time grannie did not respond.

Katia, with a quick look at the quiet face, and a sudden paling of her own, picked up the child and ran through into the forge for Stepan.

But there was nothing they could do. Marya Petrovna had run farther and quicker than little Katenka for once, and had clasped hands again with her man who had gone on in front.



## CHAPTER XXVII

By the most rigid observance of every ordinance of Paschkin, no matter how oppressive or unjust; by payment — but not too precipitately punctual payment — of every increased tax, no matter how burdensome; and by cautious abstinence from any action which might bring him under the Governor's notice, Stepan for a while lived in the peace of obscurity.

There could be no certain or lasting security, indeed, for any man while Paschkin ruled in Irkutsk. And many less able than Stepan to control their natural repugnance at his brutalities, or less unremittingly cautious in the plan of their lives, yet with no less at stake than himself, suffered bitter things from the Iron Hand.

The very recital of some of his doings made men's teeth grind savagely, and set the blood boiling in their heads, and filled their hearts with curses, even though their faces were stolid and unmoved. And the wonder — the everlasting wonder — was that Paschkin lived. That he did so was due to no lack of effort on the part of the wronged ones, and yet, in spite of all, the grip of his hand grew ever tighter and the ruthlessness of his caprice knew no bounds.

Polikof, the skin merchant, in the council one day, most foolishly ventured to state that their Lake Baikal had no communication with the Eastern Sea, as the Governor had assumed, and that therefore it was useless attempting to push trade in that direction.

It was, perhaps, necessary that some one should catch that particular bull by the horns, or worse might come of it for all concerned. Or, better still, it had been subtler wisdom on their part to let their bull run a space, even at some loss to themselves, until he found out his mistake and, of course, laid the blame of failure on their collective shoulders. In any case, some one of them less burdened as to family than Polikof might have undertaken the duty. For Polikof had eight children and had lost his wife.

“Ah! Thou thinkest thou knowest Baikal,” thundered Paschkin. “Thou shalt learn it to thy heart’s content. On Baikal shalt thou live henceforth, and if I find so much as one of thy feet on shore it shall be cut off.”

That was Paschkin to the life. To fit the punishment to what he deemed the crime was ever keen enjoyment to him.

The rest of the council sat frozen into silence for horror of it. Polikof, meekest of men, but now outcast of hope and desperate in his extremity, faced the tyrant amazingly, as outraged meekness will at times.

“For giving thee the truth, thou sendest me to death.

Thou art a devil as men say," quoth the meek one, boldly.

"Say they so?" stormed Paschkin. "I would I had their backs in one beneath my lash. But I have thine and it shall pay for the rest."

And the following day, Polikof, with his back in ribbons from the knout, started for Baikal in a telega heaped with straw, lest he should die on the road, which would have left him in much better case.

And Volnof, the trader, who was by nature of a full and rotund body, having grumbled outside that, if the taxes went on mounting up in this fashion, they would all have to live on bread and water before long, was haled before the Governor, whose long ears had caught the growl.

"So thou fearest to be brought to bread and water, — thou pot-bellied lump!" snarled Paschkin, while the wretched Volnof quivered before him like a stricken jelly-bag. "The fear is often greater than the fact. We will relieve thy mind. A month of bread and water will bring thee to the proper shape of a man, and if it fail, then thou shalt have two months!"

And he clapped the burly one behind the bars, and fed him naught but bread and water till his spirit and his body were alike broken, and he died six months later.

By such freakish deviltries, as by a process of detri- tion, the Governor's council was constantly being worn

down. He would have dispensed with it entirely but for the laws — such as they were — of the realm, which called for a council, and a council he must have. And so, whenever his brutalities had winnowed it too fine, he looked about him and pounced on this one and that, and conferred his undesired appointments from which there was no possibility of escape.

Men dreaded them as they did the plague, and resorted to all manner of shifts and manœuvres to avoid them; but though they might lie low and escape for the time, sooner or later the wide net had them.

It was not, perhaps, heroic, and might indeed suggest a lack of public spirit. But the men of Irkutsk were but very ordinary men, struggling hard to provide for their wives and families, of no great knowledge or understanding, and desirous only of being left alone to live in peace and quietness. And Paschkin was all-powerful, fearing neither God nor man, and he simply used them as his puppets and broke them at his pleasure.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

If Paschkin ever thought of Stepan Iline it was only as a wooden-head who lacked understanding sufficient to take advantage of his opportunities. But Irkutsk was even then a city of size, with many thousands of inhabitants, and it is possible he had dropped for the time being out of the busy Governor's mind. And, however the Irkutsk men might grovel before Paschkin, they held by one another, and no man ever gave another away.

Moreover, Stepan lived so quietly, and made so little mark outside, that he attracted no notice even from the police. And he, and every other man in Irkutsk, lived in the hope that Paschkin might die — naturally or by violence mattered not, so long as he died and ceased to trouble them. They would have rejoiced with him most unfeignedly if he had been appointed to some higher post — anything to have been rid of him, for it seemed barely possible that the world could hold two Paschkins, and any change could not but be for the better.

But such luck as Stepan Iline's was too good to last, and the inevitable happened. And it came as the result of an accident.

Paschkin, by dint of long searching, had possessed himself of another black horse to complete his *troika*, and with these three he whirled like a hurricane about his command. With their tails and manes flying, the whites of their eyes gleaming viciously, their nostrils aflame, the foam flecks dappling their black skins, and their pace always a wild gallop; with a wild-haired Cossack in black as driver; and the grim dark face scowling out of the tarantas or sledge behind — Paschkin's excursions were things to be avoided by old and young. At sight of him men slunk out of sight, or, if they were driving, drew well off the road, and the children fled screaming to their mothers.

One day, as he drove, his shafter cast a shoe. Paschkin's quick ear caught the clink of a forge not far away. He followed the sound and came to Stepan Iline's door, and, before Stepan was aware of him, he heard the master rating one of his men for a piece of ill-done work.

"Now see, Mikhail Alexandrovitch, such work will not do here. We give of our best, and nothing less will answer. Thou art new to our ways, but thou must come to them at once, or out thou goest neck and crop. And understand this — I tell no man twice! Break that up and do it again as it should be done."

"A man after my own heart," said Paschkin to himself, and stepped into the forge.

At sight of him Stepan's face assumed its stolid mask. But it was too late. Paschkin had heard.

"A shoe for the shafter's hind leg," he said. "And do it thyself." And Stepan knew that his time had come.

"And where hast thou been hiding all this time, Iline?" asked Paschkin, as he watched.

"I have been here at my work, Excellency," and the sparks flew broadcast from the shoe under his hammer.

"Dost remember this fellow?"

"He is one of the pair from Selemsinsk."

"Ay, an excellent bargain. Almost worth coming to Irkutsk for. Thy business prospers?"

"By hard work we make both ends meet, Excellency."

"I want some of thy time, however. My council needs fresh blood at times, and needs it badly now. They are pig-heads all. I name thee to it. Thou wilt come to-morrow."

And when he went into the house, after work, Katia's clear vision plumbed the matter before ever he opened his lips. She had seen the hated team at the forge, and fear and Paschkin went together.

"Ah!" she cried. "He has got thee at last," and there was foreboding in her voice and face.

"He has called me to the council," said Stepan, gloomily, while little Katenka climbed on his knee and tried to coax the usual smiles with her kisses. "And I had as lief he had not. It is not a post for any honest man."

"Thou wilt be very discreet," said Katia, soothingly,

though her heart was heavy at sight of his face so downcasted.

"Ay, truly," he said very soberly. "For thy sake and the little one's I will be as quiet as a dog under its master's foot. But it is not a part that suits me."

"Every night and every morning I pray for Paschkin's death or removal," cried Katia, passionately. "And now I will pray harder than ever. Thou wilt suffer his insolences, Stepan, and bite thy tongue, but give him no occasion against thee."

"Truly will I. But thou wilt have a tongueless man within a week, I fear. 'Tis no easy matter to sit still and silent while the Devil harries thy neighbour to death."

"Thou wilt think ever of the little one and me. No good can come of opposing Paschkin. Perhaps the good God will hear our prayers and take him from us."

"Would that he might!" said Stepan, fervently, and not a man or a woman in Irkutsk who prayed but prayed the same thing.



## CHAPTER XXIX

THE position of councillor under Paschkin was, as Stepan said, no easy one.

Stiffen one's face, and bite one's tongue, and steel one's heart as one might, it was well nigh impossible to sit quiet and so be made party to doings which filled one's soul with loathing and with self-contempt. Yet a word, — nay, even a look at times, — and the thunder was loosed and the lightning flashed, and life — home, wife, children, and all that had made life bearable, — all were gone in a moment at the word of a man whose word was law, and who, to all intents and purposes, acknowledged no higher power than himself. God was in heaven and the Tzar was very far away.

For men with red blood in their veins, and hearts above a sheep's, the position was a painful and a hateful one. Still more painful ones, however, were thrust, red and raw, upon their notice from time to time, and Paschkin met with no more opposition than sufficed to keep his mind pleasantly occupied in devising punishments befitting these offences against his prerogative.

Even Ivan Iline, who had deemed his past sufferings sufficient condonation for any present pusillanimity,

had not escaped, though his end had not come by any active provocation of the tyrant.

And Stepan was younger, and his blood had not been chilled for life by the rigours of the long road and the black injustice of his transplanting. And so Stepan — will as he might, with all that was in him and ever present thought of consequences to Katia and little Katenka — found it almost beyond him at times to sit there acquiescent while the Governor wrung the withers of his fellows and ground them small beneath his heel.

He sank low in his own estimation, he suffered much, he writhed at his self-imposed impotence. But he said to himself that it was for Katia and little Katenka, and sometimes, when he returned from the council, he would go into the forge and hammer Paschkin into and out of bars of white-hot metal, till the whole place rang with the sound of it, and the fiery sparks were like visible curses.

Vicariously Paschkin suffered much punishment and many deaths at many hands, but in actual fact he went his way exulting, and cared for neither God nor man, and still less for suffering women and children.

And Katia, the while, lived in perpetual dread of some outbreak on Stepan's part, or some untoward and unprovoked happening, which would break their lives and end their happiness for ever. And she never

ceased to urge her husband to prudence for their sakes, though the degradation of it troubled her as it did him.

He would tell her, now and again, of things that happened in the council, and others she heard outside. She knew quite enough of the matter to make her heart sore for him who had to bear the active brunt of it. She did her best, by her quick sympathy and loving comradeship, to salve his wounds and make him feel himself again at home at all events.

So, for twelve bitter months, Stepan lay in the mire of his own manhood under the heel of Paschkin, and then, in the most natural way and without any active invitation on his part, the storm loosed upon him and swept him into the outer darkness.

Paschkin was capricious as a tiger. If one moment, replete with the satisfaction of one or other of his indulgences, he seemed to purr harmlessly, his teeth hidden and his claws sheathed, the next he was on his feet scratching and biting at anything that offered, and with but one thought, — to rend and tear.

At times the capricious twist in him would invite — and when that failed, command — discussion of his projects. And at such times his councillors sat warily, became even more stupid and stolid than was customary with them, and behind their masks tried hard to see which way the cat required them to jump. If they sat mum, he would call upon them in turn for an

opinion, and their opinions were as a rule extraordinarily alike and all akin to his own.

Once or twice, when so called upon, Stepan's true self had peeped out in spite of his self-schooling, and Paschkin had apparently found his ideas worthy of consideration and had taken no umbrage.

Where all rigidly label themselves blockheads, the faintest gleam of sense shines brightly. Stepan's inadvertent lapses caused the Governor to regard him as a man of acute intelligence, and so, possibly, a danger if he should develop any signs of self-will. His immunity from consequences caused his fellow-councillors to regard him somewhat suspiciously as a favourite.

"You take risks, Stepan Ivanovitch," said old Sabine, father of his friend Feodor, one day.

"Before God, Feodor Feodorovitch, I do my best to look a fool, but when he asks one must answer."

"The only safe answer is the one he wants. It is not safe to tell him anything he does not know. Polikof knew more than Paschkin, and he is dying in a boat on Baikal."

"I will bite my tongue still harder, and try my best to look still more a fool," said Stepan.

"It is the safest way, when one lives in the tiger's mouth," said old Sabine.

## CHAPTER XXX

FOR the first time since Ivan Iline's death — since Paschkin hanged the leaders of the delayed convoy — since Stepan Iline gave the men of Verkinsk sound advice as to their future conduct if they valued their skins — the silver convoy was a week beyond its time, and from the very first day Paschkin's wrath had been accumulating.

Each day his wretched council had looked for it to boil over, and had wondered who would be scorched out of existence, and each man had done his best to edge himself as far away from the wrath to come as possible. If they could all have taken to their beds with deadly sickness, they would have rejoiced. But it was no good trying that.

The previous winter, Dmitri Gros, over seventy years of age, had fallen suddenly sick. Paschkin missed him from the council room, asked where he was, was told.

"Sick!" he shouted. "I have given him no permission to be sick," as though in this, as in most mundane matters, the greater included the less, and his powers of life and death included the minor ones of sickness and health.

Then he summoned his chief of police.

“Dmitri Gros has not come to the council. Go and fetch him. You understand!”

The chief of police understood, and presently re-appeared, two of his men behind him carrying Dmitri Gros wrapped up in blankets, his head hanging limply, his face pinched and blue with the cold. He was not much use at the council that day, unless as a warning, and the next day he died.

So even a genuine sick bed was no refuge for reluctant councillors, and the dangers of those days of wrath had to be faced.

On the day upon which the storm broke, Paschkin came to the council in one of his blackest moods. He had drunk overmuch the previous night, and his cook had taken advantage of the opportunity to do likewise. Breakfast, in consequence, had been a failure on both sides, and Paschkin's wrath — which dared not vent itself on the cook, who was utterly irreplaceable and a jewel of a man, except when he was drunk — ravened within him. On such small hinges — a dish over or under cooked, a flavour not quite to the taste — do men's lives and fortunes turn when absolute power is in the hands of one man.

If Paschkin had been in no blacker humour than usual that day, Stepan Iline's life might have run on less monstrous lines.

“The convoy — has it come?” growled Paschkin.

There was no news of the convoy.

His eye roved balefully over his submissive flock, and every member of it broke into a cold sweat of terror as it rested on him, and each man's breathing stopped till the black glance had passed, and then he let out his breath very gently lest the sound of it should provoke the danger back.

Stepan's heart jerked furiously as Paschkin's eye came along towards him, stopped as it rested on him, jerked again for a second as it passed on, and swept rapidly over the rest.

From the first moment he knew it would settle finally on him. It was inevitable. It was fate, and there was no escape. The connection between himself and Verkinsk could not but recur to Paschkin's mind.

He had been there already. He was acquainted with the road and with the men of Verkinsk. His father, also, had been sent on this very same errand. His father, indeed, had never returned — as he might never return. But Paschkin would send him all the same. He knew it in his bones, and Paschkin might just as well have saved himself the trouble of curdling the blood of the others. But then he liked to see them squirm.

“You, Ilie!” — the black eyes, smouldering with wrath and the effect of the previous night's entertainment, had shot back at him — “you know the way. You will start at once for Verkinsk, find out why the convoy is not here, and punish those who are to blame.

If the delay has been there, you will bring me their heads. If you meet the convoy, you will go on all the same. I will hold the leaders till you return."

Stepan had risen to meet his fate. There was no escape. His face was set rigidly to go through with it, hideous errand though it was.

He had done the journey once. He might do it again and come back alive, though his father had not had that good fortune. But Paschkin had not done.

"You will start at once. Ten days to go. Ten days to return. Five days there. You will be back here in five-and-twenty days, or —" and the bull head nodded pregnantly.

The business was bad enough, but this fixing of impossible limits was too much. He must have a fair chance. Paschkin did not understand what he was asking. It was as much as a man's life was worth to oppose him, but it was an even question which was worse, — to go with a rope round one's neck, or to speak out, — and there was but a moment to decide.

"With respect, Excellency," said Stepan, and nothing could have been more respectful than his tone and his bent head, but the others all held their breath and awaited the explosion, "ten days is not enough for the journey at this season. The waters will be out and the snow is not now deep enough for runners."

"You will take two Cossacks, and you will be back



here in twenty-five days or your skin will pay for it," thundered Paschkin, with his devil in his eyes.

"I will do my utmost, Excellency. No man can do more. But ten days —"

"At once! I will send your papers within the hour," bellowed Paschkin, and Stepan went.

And the council had a rough day of it, and each man, when he reached home, thanked the saints that he was not Stepan Iline, and that his own head was still safe on his shoulders, even if he did feel morally bruised and broken.

Stepan went away home grinding his teeth to get his face straight before he met Katia.

In the space of five minutes his outlook on life had changed from gray — like this wintry sky, but shot with rosy gleams which were Katia, and little Katenka, and home — to densest black, through which he could not see his way.

For a moment he was stunned and his faculties numbed. He had committed the unpardonable sin. He had countered Paschkin, he — after all his well-considered resolves and Katia's prayers!

He could not see the end of it, but neither could he see what else he could have done. The journey could not be done in ten days, nor the business in five-and-twenty. It was humanly impossible, but then Paschkin was the Devil and humanity did not enter into his composition or consideration.

Before he reached home, however, his brain was actively at work again, and his face was straight enough. Too straight, — set like a rock, — and Katia perceived it instantly.

“Oh, Stepan! What is it?” she cried, with the fear in her eyes that was common to the women of Irkutsk in those days, and commonest of all to those whose husbands had the misfortune to sit in the council.

“The convoy is behind again, as I told you, dushenka, and Paschkin wants me to go and seek it.”

He wished to break the full of the ill news to her as gently as might be, but Katia’s active mind and natural forebodings covered all the ground between and leaped at once to the end.

“Dear God!” she wailed. “And you will go like your father and never return. It is the end.”

So he dropped all attempt at disguise, and told her plainly and quickly the thoughts that had strained through the turmoil of his heart and brain as he came home.

“It may be the end unless we look to ourselves, Katia, and that we will do. I start within the hour on this madness and it may be I shall never return. It is bitterness to give it all up, but as well cut my throat at once and spare his Excellency the trouble. And we will manage better than that. Here is what you will do, dear one. You will collect all the money it is possible to get in. Some we shall never get, and

you must go about it very quietly. Say to each that I had to start for Paschkin at a moment's notice and you need the money. If I do not get back on the twenty-fifth day, then you will dispose of everything we have here at the best price you can get. Simon Rapin, the Jew, will buy — at a price. He will beat you down, but he is an honest man and his money is good. Then you will send all the money, except what you will need for yourself and our little Katenka, to your father at Selemsinsk. Simon will do that for us. Then if I do not come back, and I have no hope of that, you will go to your father also. You understand? Better perhaps that you should know nothing of my plans. I will send you word, and you will join me where I am, out of reach of Paschkin."

Katia had followed every word with wide, understanding eyes. It was a crisis in their life, perhaps the breaking of it. Every nerve and every sense within her was on the strain. She would have liked to lie down on the ground and weep. But this was no time for weeping. Time enough for that later on. Now she must act. She must play the man though her woman's heart was breaking.

Within somewhat narrow bounds, and subject always to such sudden disaster as threatens those who live on a volcano, they had been happy. And now the earth was rocking under their feet and their happiness was in peril.

"I understand," she said quietly. "I will do all just as you say, Stepan," and she set to work to make provision for his journey,—food, clothing packed in woollen bags which he could sit on in the terantas, things he would never have thought of himself, but which would recall her to his grateful mind a thousand times before he reached his journey's end.

He drew from its hiding-place his small store of money and divided it with her. It was not much, for money grows outside the stocking, not inside it, and he was a business man.

They went together into the next room, and he kissed the fair-haired little Katenka, fast asleep in her bed, for she was only three years old and still retained the faculty of waking when others were very sound asleep, and of sleeping when others were very wide awake.

Then they closed all the doors and sat in silence, seeking a blessing on this woful journey.

And then a rude knocking on the outer door told them that the time was come.

One final embrace, long and close, and they parted.

## CHAPTER XXXI

THE old Adam in a man hates with a very vehement and natural hatred the man that wrongs him. It is curious that he hates equally, if not even more bitterly, the man he wrongs. For the wronged one is a perpetual accusation, an incarnate conscience, to be thrust out, stifled, done away with, by any means that offer.

Stepan Iline hated Paschkin for the brutal caprice which made, almost inevitably, for the breaking of his life. Paschkin conceived an equal detestation of his victim. The thought of him twisted in his brain like an evil maggot and gave him no peace.

He recalled now innumerable minute evidences of revolt on Iline's part, — veiled looks which no stolid mask had been able wholly to hide; glances of disgust which escaped him unawares; a restlessness under others' harrings which no self-steeling to endurance had been able absolutely to control.

Without a doubt the fellow was contumacious and needed a lesson. The others also. For one such in the council was bound to infect the rest. And he always found that after the chastisement of one of their number the others were more amenable than ever.

There had always been something stiff-necked and

strait-laced about this young Iline, he remembered now—a kind of aloofness, an arrogant bending under compulsion which undoubtedly testified to an independence of spirit which only needed opportunity to develop into a danger.

When a maggot such as that gets into the hotbed of an evil brain, inflamed with wine and all indulgence, it grows and breeds in most amazing fashion.

Before Stepan had started on his journey, Paschkin had succeeded in convincing himself beyond all doubt that he was a danger to himself, a menace to the State, an artful and insidious plotter. A fellow evidently to be got rid of without delay on account of the cleverness which had enabled him to impress himself upon them all as nothing more than an upright, simple, hard-working man.

But he, Paschkin, had had experience of that kind of man. Ample! He knew just how to treat him, and that was to put down his foot and squash him so that he could make no more trouble.

But there are more ways than one of putting one's foot on a man and squashing him. And here was where Paschkin's special faculty came into play. Punishment to be effective, and to fulfil its ultimate object, should be in such form as to act as a deterrent to other evil doers, and Paschkin was notorious for his punitive freaks.

After the council that day, the taste of Stepan Iline

had grown so nauseous in the Governor's mouth that he could not get rid of it even with much wine.

Just as night fell the belated convoy from Verkinsk trooped in, wayworn and apprehensive. It had started late, they asserted, and they had had to take long détours among the hills to avoid the floods below. They had seen nothing of Iline. He must have passed them as they circled among the hills. Paschkin flung the leaders into one of his black holes to await his pleasure, and thought pleasantly of Iline ploughing over the flooded roads toward Verkinsk. He had evidently risked the lower route in hopes of saving time.

From the accounts of the convoy he would never be able to accomplish the journey in ten days, and — unless they were lying, which they probably were, in hopes of saving their skins — he would find his work cut out for him at Verkinsk. He would exceed his time, and must suffer punishment. What form that punishment should take would be subject for pleasant consideration. Meanwhile, the devil in Paschkin chuckled grimly at the humour of the situation, — the convoy safely arrived; Iline breaking his heart in his haste to fetch it, and arriving home, after all his labours, only to serve as an example to such as might at any future time be inclined to question the Governor's orders and fail in carrying them out. Without doubt it was a droll position, and Paschkin's devil was mightily tickled by it.

So to more wine and such warped musing as wine may generate on the subject of Stepan Iline as an example to the rest.

It came to him in the middle of the night, when he awoke with a throat like a lime-kiln, and a head that ached savagely with hard thinking, and other things.

“Ten days to go! Ten days to return! Ten days! Ten days!” — and the idea which his muddled brain had been rooting after while he slept, dawned upon him, and he laughed hoarsely into the darkness, — that grim laugh that set men’s flesh creeping with thoughts of briny knouts and grisly deaths.

“That’s it! That’s it! — Ten days! Ten days!” and he was so pleased with himself that he rolled over and went to sleep and, having shed his burden, slept quite soundly.

When the convoy arrived, the previous day, the others had asked, “Shall we send after Stepan Iline, Excellency?”

And he had growled: “I will see to Iline. The journey will cool his blood.”

When he got up in the morning, he busied himself with the preparation of certain documents which afforded him such enjoyment that he came to his breakfast still chuckling, and even overlooked several trifling delinquencies on the part of the cook, who carried his liquor less manfully than his master.

And after breakfast he sent for the hardest rider



among his Cossacks, and said to him, "You will take these papers to Verkinsk and deliver them to the chief of police there. Iline has taken the lower road. You will take the higher. It is longer, but you travel alone, and he carries three. You should get there before him. If you should come across him, you will say nothing of the arrival of the convoy. You understand?"

"I understand, Excellency."

"Make no mistake, or your hide will pay for it. Now go, and travel quickly!"

And Taras, the Cossack, with his hide in pawn, travelled so quickly that he reached Verkinsk on the eleventh day, half a day ahead of Stepan Iline.

## CHAPTER XXXII

THE thoughts that surged in Stepan Iline's brain throughout that grim journey to Verkinsk were hard and bitter ones.

At first his heart was so bruised and torn with this sudden break in his life, and the parting from Katia and little Katenka, that he could think of nothing else. For he did not attempt to deceive himself. He had, without any intention that way, fallen foul of Paschkin, and he knew too well the fate that awaited the man who did that.

Then bitter hatred of Paschkin got the better even of his soreness, and ran riot in him for a time. The fire of it held within it something of healing for his wounds, or at all events of numbing and deadening. Before the fire burnt he had felt bruised and broken. While it burnt he felt himself a man again. He knew that this new man was kin to the Devil and Paschkin, and yet, for the time, he let it burn.

Dimly, through the smoke of his wrath, he perceived the cause of the wrongs under which he and his kind suffered. Why should any one man have powers so great that he could break his fellows with a word? It always had been so. He supposed it always would

be so. But it was not right, and he knew too little of happier lands to know that this wrong too, like all other wrongs under which men suffer, was capable of righting, if only men knew how and were ready to suffer deaths for their convictions.

It might be possible to kill Paschkin, for, after all, he was only a man like other men, and all men die, though so far he had escaped. But his understanding was not so undeveloped as not to perceive that Paschkin was only a part of an evil system. If Paschkin was killed, another would come in his place. And the next comer might be as bad, though he could hardly be worse.

If he got the chance, he would certainly like to kill Paschkin. Not that it would do any good, but there would be a mighty satisfaction in it. He would like to kill him slowly, bit by bit, making him suffer as he had made others suffer.

But in time the fire burnt down, and all his mind was bent on his own concerns, — how to escape from the hand of Paschkin, how to get Katia and little Katenka to him again, where to go, and how best to get there.

He must go first to Verkinsk, for he could not be rid of his two Cossacks till he got there. Besides, Verkinsk lay toward the border beyond which he hoped Paschkin's power would not extend.

From Verkinsk he would manage to steal away some-

how. Then he would work round toward Selemsinsk, where Katia and little Katenka would be waiting for him. And with the money saved from the wreckage in Irkutsk he would start life again, no matter on how small a scale, so long as it was not shadowed by Paschkin.

There would be difficulties, of course. One needed papers to travel with, even in Siberia. But he would avoid towns and the police until he got far beyond the limits of Paschkin, and then he would assume some other name and concoct some story which would have to carry him through.

It was a hazard, for paperless men were outcast. But it was the only course open to him. And there must be many places where a skilled workman would be welcome and perhaps not too many questions asked, and he would find one of them.

He would work the flesh off his hands, if need be, to make a living for Katia and the little one. Black bread without the fear of Paschkin would be sweeter far than the amplest faring Irkutsk could afford.

There was very little speech among them. The roads, such as they were, were in terrible condition, — sinks of mud with huge boulders at the bottom. The only safety for teeth and tongue was to keep them locked in silence.

And at night, when they found lodging in any hut or farmhouse they came across, they were too weary

and battered with the day's toil to care for aught but food and sleep.

They had, moreover, very little in common, save the equal capacity for bruises, weariness, and disgust. If Stepan's ideas on misgovernment were embryonic, his companions' had not even begun to sprout. They were simply Cossacks, and did what they were told, without wasting any of their animal strength on thinking.

With the one idea of getting to the end as soon as possible, and therefore to the new beginning and Katia and little Katenka, Stepan pressed his horses to the utmost, and for the same reason chose the lower and shorter road in hopes that the waters would, by this time, have got back into their proper channels.

In places they had, but even there the roads they had left were frightful, and where they had not they had to make long détours. And so the travellers proved once more the truth of the saying, that short cuts make long roads.

It was a nightmare of a journey. For eleven nights they never took off more than their big boots. For it was always late when they arrived, and all they wanted then was to eat and fall asleep, and they were off again at daybreak.

On the evening of the twelfth day they stumbled into Verkinsk more dead than alive, more mud than men to look at. And there, having left their papers with

the police, according to rule, they kicked off clothes and boots, and fell on the first beds that offered, careless of governors, or convoys, or documents, or any mortal thing save that rest or death must be theirs, and they did not much care which.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

WHEN he had slept off the worst effects of his journey, Stepan went to the Governor to inquire about the silver convoy.

"It reached Irkutsk the day you started," said the Governor.

"It had not arrived when we left."

"Paschkin has sent a messenger who got here yesterday. He took the higher road, as the convoy did. You made a mistake in taking the lower."

"I knew the lower was shorter and I hoped the waters would be in again. I was to inquire into the delay, and Paschkin gave me orders as to punishment."

"There was no delay here. The convoy started two days before its usual time. But it tried the lower road and had to come back."

"Then there is no one to be punished, and I have no heads to take back to Paschkin, for which I am glad. I will rest here two days. The travelling was very rough. Every bone in my body is sore."

"You had better see the chief of police. He has some papers for you," said the Governor, tersely.

"For me? From Irkutsk?"

"From Irkutsk!" and Stepan went off to the police office.

"You have papers for me?" he said to the chief, a stout, red-bearded man, smoking a large pipe.

"Yes," and he handed to Iline a bundle of official documents, and gazed stolidly at him while he read them.

After his first quick glance to gather an idea of the meaning of the papers, Stepan straightened up suddenly and looked dazedly at the chief, but saw only a dense cloud of smoke and a grim official face, and a pair of heavy eyes looking dimly out at him through it.

He bent to the papers again, but the letters danced before his eyes. It took two slow perusals to assure him he had read aright.

The first document stated with brutal curtness that Stepan Ivanovitch Iline, being guilty of contumacy, and having shown evidence of a desire to resist the lawful commands of the Governor, was condemned to perpetual exile from the province of Irkutsk. Blow below the belt No. 1!

The other documents were his papers, without which circulation anywhere within the empire was next to impossible, — a new set of papers, in place of those he had left there the previous night, and the indorsement on them was that high stroke of genius which had provoked the Governor's own hoarse eulogistic laughter in the dark.

"It is decreed that the within-named, Stepan Ivanovitch Iline, may travel where he will within the bounds



of Siberia, save within the province of Irkutsk, but that he shall not be allowed to remain or reside in any one place for a longer period than ten days upon any condition whatsoever. It is enjoined upon the police to execute this decree with the utmost stringency."

He read it again, slowly and carefully. His thoughts grew heavy and confused as the full meaning of it beat slowly in upon his dulled brain.

It was not the flagrant injustice of it that hit him hardest. Life under the rod inures one to injustice. It was not the decree of exile, the breaking up of his home, the ruin of his prospects. These things were too common to excite surprise. Siberia was wide. Paschkin ruled only in Irkutsk. All governors were surely not Paschkins. And it had already been in his mind to get as far away from him as possible.

But this bedevilment of his papers! What did it mean? How was any man to live under such circumstances?

Very slowly a dull comprehension of it all oozed through the tangle of his thoughts.

Homeless henceforth until he died! A perpetual wanderer! Summer and winter, well or ill, living or dying, he must be always on the road.

Friendless, too! For how could any man, so driven, make friends?

And what of Katia and the little Katenka? His heart died within him at thought of them.

Before God, it was too much that any man should live to break his fellows like this!

He looked up at the chief of police, and his eyes were strained and dim and confused, and full of impotent fury, like those of a newly-trapped beast.

The chief of police looked back at him and smoked stolidly. He had seen worse things than this, worse to look at anyway, and he concerned himself only with the outsides of things.

As chief of police he could neither affect nor afford any shreds of emotion or the finer feelings. But the smoke-cloud in which he sat, and which lips and pipe added to at automatic intervals, redeemed the stern official front somewhat. He looked at Iline in a two-fold capacity.

"It is too much. It is infamous," groaned Stepan, through his teeth.

"Might be worse," growled the smoker.

"Worse? There is no worse. May God's curse —"

"Better only think it," suggested the official. "His Excellency's ears are long and plentiful. And it certainly might be worse," added the smoker. "He might have ordered you the knout every tenth day as he did the wretched Voronin. It did not take many ten days, I assure you, in his case. I think it was only the third — no, the fourth, no, it was the third — on which he died. Oh, yes, decidedly it might be worse. All you've got to do is just to keep joggling along."

That was all. Just to keep jogging along — summer and winter, well or ill, living or dying — till he could jog along no longer.

“I must go home — and think,” said Iline, looking vaguely at him.

“That’s right! Go home and think, Stepan Ivanovitch, but don’t think too much and do not think out loud. Remember his Excellency’s ears. And when will you go into Yeniseisk?”

“Yeniseisk?” said Iline, vaguely.

“Well, you don’t want to go to Yakutsk, I suppose, and Irkutsk is shut against you. How soon will you go?”

Iline looked at him numbly but said nothing.

“Well, we’ll say to-morrow. Now, you’d better go home and think. And don’t think out loud!”

And Iline went back to the house where he was staying, and lay down on his bed like a wounded animal.

He felt suddenly old and worn and stupid. He could not think connectedly or to any purpose. The one great black fact blocked the way of his thoughts, as a sudden blow stops the current of a man’s life.

It held him like a monstrous cold hand all through the night as he lay there, neither sleeping nor waking, and growing wearier every hour. When he got up in the morning he felt twenty years older, for hope is life, and he had nothing left in life to hope for.

"You are going. That is right!" said the chief of police, cheerfully, when he went for his papers. "It might have been worse, oh, yes, I assure you it might have been very much worse. Which way do you go?"

"To Yeniseisk," said Iline, sombrely.

"That is right. It is better than Yakutsk."

"It is all the same."

"Nay, it is better than Yakutsk. Yakutsk is hell. Well, — God with you! They will be expecting you over there, you know."

"Who?" said Iline, drearily.

"The police. Paschkin will have sent them word."

And at that, the dim idea Stepan had been nursing — of changing his name and beginning life again — died. Without doubt Paschkin was the Devil.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

HE bought food for several days, and a stout staff, and set off on foot on the journey that was to have no end. Later on, he said to himself in a dull, hopeless way, if it was worth while, and if it was possible, he might buy himself a telega and a horse, if he could get them cheap.

He had not much money, and he must husband it with care until — until — he hardly knew what. Perhaps he could get some more from Katia at Selemsinsk. Perhaps he could earn some on the road, though that was not very likely. How could a man earn anything when he might not stop longer than ten days in any one place? He ground his teeth again at the malignant prescience of Devil Paschkin.

For the present he would walk. Weariness of body might lighten heaviness of soul. To sit in a wagon and think would drive him crazy. Besides, Verkinsk was in any case no place to buy either horse or wagon, which reflection showed that his brain was still not entirely incapable of work.

He struck due west across the hills and found the advantage of being tied to no road. He plodded steadily on all that day, eating when he was hungry, drinking

from the mountain streams. No rough hillside was too rough or too steep for him. The grinding of his feet on rock and shingle gave him relief. It was something trampled on and overcome. He wished to God it had been Paschkin's body. How he would have rejoiced in the trampling!

It was early summer, but the season had been late and the waters were still out on every side, tinkling among the rocks and rushing down the valleys. The weather was mild and open, and he heard the cuckoo calling in the woods.

At night he sought cover among the pines and firs, and built himself a fire for the sake of its cheer, and sat brooding over it till it died. And sometimes he would sit and curse Paschkin. And sometimes he thought of none but Katia and his little Katenka, and he would lie prone on his face, murmuring their names in agony of craving. But, sooner or later, he would make himself a bed of green-tipped twigs on last year's needles, and lie down and sleep as Governor Paschkin never slept, and would rise refreshed.

And on the third day, having seen no man since he left Verkinsk, his life began to lift its head again, for hope dies hard in a man, and a tiny seedling sprang up in his heart, and put out its little white shoots.

The idea gradually grew in him that Katia and little Katenka might possibly — just possibly — be recoverable from the wreckage after all. In his utter desola-

tion, in these vast silences and solitudes, face to face with Nature only and whatever might be behind her, his heart craved for them till at times he cried their names aloud to still the pain that wrung him. For the very sound of their names made him feel a little less lonely.

Nothing else mattered. Business, home, future prospects, — those taken and those left, — all these came to be very little things in his eyes. The loss of everything had hit him hard at first. The blank misery of the future had beaten him down. But as his heart recovered itself it found these things as nothing compared with those others. He had got down to the essentials. If only he could have Katia, and the little Katenka, and himself — all the rest might go.

If Katia had gone to her father at Selemsinsk, as he had bidden her, there might be reasonable ground for hope, he thought. Selemsinsk was indeed in Irkutsk, and Irkutsk was closed to him. But it was five hundred miles from Irkutsk city and less than fifty from the border. He would travel down the border line till he came to the nearest point to Selemsinsk and then —

The penalty of failure would of course be death. But better to die striving for that which was dearer than life than live alone for fifty years and die alone by the roadside at last.

He did not close his eyes to the fact that it would be a terribly trying life for his wife and child, ever moving

on, moving on, in summer and winter, in sickness and health, till Death said, "Stop!"

But he knew Katia, and he knew that no ease and comfort of home and friends would satisfy her without him. No, he had no fears as to what Katia would do if only the chance offered.

Nor did he close his eyes to the fact that the difficulties ahead of him were well-nigh insuperable. For even if he recovered Katia and the child, how was he to hold them?

Would the police grant Katia her papers? If not, they might be stopped at the first town they came to.

Would Paschkin's senseless venom pursue her as it had himself, or would it be satisfied with the ruin it had already wrought? That he would learn at Selem-sinsk. Till then he would hope.

So for thirty days he tramped, crossing hills and rivers, and the long fertile plains which would soon be all ablaze with their full summer glory. He met very few travellers, and those mostly downcast men like himself, who regarded him with suspicion and seemed desirous to escape observation. Some watched him furtively with speculative eyes, from shelter of rock or bush, but let him pass in peace when they saw that he looked no better off than themselves. These were such as had answered the call of the cuckoo and broken bounds at risk of life for the brief freedom of the summer.



Now and again he stopped the night at a peasant's house, and found first suspicious, then sympathetic, hosts, for all knew Paschkin and his ways. And these would take no money for the little they could give, but joined fervently in his comminations of the Governor, and pressed their scanty food upon him to help him on his way.

## CHAPTER XXXV

At last he found himself beyond the borders of Irkutsk, and turned his face at once to the south in the direction of his hopes. He plodded on till he learned that Selemsinsk lay to the east across the border. Then, taking his life in his hands and four days' provisions in his wallet, he crossed the forbidden line again and pressed forward toward his heart's desire.

Villages he avoided by instinct, and he went near no house, and on the third day he saw in the distance the pointed spire and long line of straggling roofs which were Selemsinsk.

He waited till all the lights were out, then crept like a thief to the back of the house where Vasili Totsin lived. He had no difficulty in reaching it unobserved, for all the houses faced the single street and their backs lay open to the country, and Vasili's house was the first you came to on the road from Yeniseisk.

He tapped on a shutter and waited. He heard a stir inside and a murmur of surprise. It required many tappings, however, before the voice of one who had been listening for some time behind the shutter asked cautiously, "Who is it?"

"Open, Vasili Vasilievitch! It is I, Stepan Iline," in a whisper.

Another surprised murmur, and presently the door was quietly unbolted, and he slipped stealthily in, and stood before Totsin and Marya Feodorovna, whose faces were twisted with anxious surprise.

By the glimmer of a shaded lamp they eyed him doubtfully and with some fear. The manner of his coming implied trouble. He looked back at them with equal surprise, and asked quickly: "Katia? Is she not here, and the little Katenka?"

"Here? No. Why should she be here, Stepan Ivanovitch? And why do you come like a thief in the night?" asked Totsin.

"Katia not here? Then you have not heard? I hoped to find her here." And he quickly told them the whole matter.

"It has taken her longer to settle our affairs than I expected," he said stoutly. "I must come again, and then we will go away together."

"Ach!" said the mother, with an anxious face. "It will be a sore life for Katia and the little one, Stepan Ivanovitch."

"Not what I would choose, matushka, and none of my choosing. But maybe we can smooth it. I have been thinking much as I walked, and I have been walking for two months."

"And what have you been thinking?" asked Totsin, whose little eyes had been winking vigorously, to keep his thoughts from peeping out.

“Katia should bring three or four thousand roubles,” — at which the crafty little eyes of Katia’s father snapped more vigorously than ever, — “or they may come to you through Simon Rapin. With them, I have been thinking, I could set up as travelling trader. Travel I must — may Paschkin’s soul dwell in torment for ever! — and trade I can. I will build a house on a telega for Katia and the little one, and we will travel together.”

“It will be weary work at times,” said the mother.

“It will be for Katia to decide,” said Stepan. “If she would sooner stop here — well! But I think she will come with me.”

Vasili Vasilievitch in his own mind decided that, under the circumstances, a daughter’s proper place was in her father’s house, especially a daughter with three or four thousand roubles. Bozhe-moi, with three of four thousand roubles one could —

“Yes, yes, Katia must decide,” said he, blinking like an owl. “You don’t think his Excellency would put any hindrance in the way of her coming, Stepan Ivanovitch?”

It was the one fear that had been in Stepan’s own mind all along. He answered the more brusquely.

“Why should he? He had no grounds for complaint against me. What has Katia done?”

“Nothing! But then, neither had you, and she is your wife, and he is Paschkin.”

Stepan nodded gloomily. "That is true, and Paschkin is the Devil."

"Will you stop the night with us, Stepan Ivanovitch?" asked Marya Feodorovna, nervously.

"I must get back to the hills before it is light, matushka. But I will eat, and you will give me food to take with me. I will come again in thirty days."

"It is dangerous," said Totsin. "If you were caught —"

"I shall not be caught." And after eating, he stole away as quietly as he had come.

And as he pushed through the dark toward the hills, he could not rid himself of the recollection of his father-in-law's blinking eyes, and the crafty look that had come into his face at mention of the money.

"He will do his best to keep Katia," said Stepan to himself.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

THREE separate times, at intervals of a month, Stépan ventured in again at risk of his life, brimming each time as he neared the house with the hope of clasping his wife and child in his arms once more. God! how he ached for them! At times the gnawing heart hunger so overcame him that he would lie down in the woods, and claw his fingers deep into the bed of pine needles, and bite them with his teeth and beat the ground with his feet. And each time he went, and found them still not come, his heart was wrung with new fears.

The times between his visits he spent in aimless wanderings along the border, avoiding towns and villages as much as possible, stopping a day or two with stray peasants, living sometimes for days together in the open, fearful all the time lest his haunting of the border should set the police on the track of his hopes, and racked with anxieties for his wife and child.

His money was running low; for though he spent little, it was still all outgoing and nothing coming in. The prospect of sooner or later having to beg his bread was staring him in the face, when a slice of luck fell to him, and opened new doors to his failing heart, and helped him to his feet again.

He was plodding along the lower slopes of the Altai's one day, when, turning a corner, he came on a desperately unequal struggle going on in the road in front.

A dejected horse, harnessed to a laden telega, hung its head forlornly in the middle of the road and took no interest in the fight of which it was one of the objects.

Three rough tramps, armed with sticks, were doing their best to make an end of the owner of the telega, a gray-haired man with a long beard. And he, armed only with another stick, and his back against his property, was striving frantically to beat them off, but with little chance against such odds.

One of the ruffians had slipped round to the other side of the cart, and was just about to bring down his cudgel on the gray head, when Iline ran in with a shout and bowled him over with a cracked skull, and then ran round and set to with hearty goodwill on the others.

They faced him for a moment, but only for a moment. The open-air life had braced and strengthened him mightily, and he was a big man before. He looked objectionably capable of beating them into pulp. Then, too, he was in one of his desperate moods concerning Katia and little Katenka. All day he had been aching for something to rend and tear — Paschkin from choice, but anything would do. And here was his chance.

The raiders saw it in his eyes, and turned and bolted.

The gray-haired man seated himself in the middle

of the road and rested his hands on the ground, and sat there panting and looking at Stepan, and Stepan saw that he was a Jew.

"You came — in the nick — of time," panted the old man. "Another minute —"

"And you would have had a sore head," said Stepan. "Have a drink and you will feel better," and he got him water from a stream that brawled across the road, and took a long pull himself and mopped his forehead with his sleeve.

As the old man struggled to his feet and felt his bruises, he caught sight of the body on the other side of the wagon and went round and bent over it.

"It is well," he said quietly. "May the lesson serve!"

"What shall we do with him?"

"Let him lie. You struck hard, but his head is harder, and without doubt his heart is harder still. He would have killed me."

Then he fixed a pair of keen black eyes on Stepan, and regarded him carefully, and said: "I am Peter Krop. Who are you?"

"I am Stepan Iline."

"Iline!" said the old man, musingly, and continued to weigh him with his glance; and presently he seemed satisfied, for he said: "If your way lies with mine, Stepan Iline, I will give you a lift," and they both got on to the wagon, and the old horse went on as if nothing had happened.



"Whence do you come and where do you go, Stepan Iline?" asked the Jew.

"I wander to and fro," said Stepan.

"Like the Devil. It is not a profitable calling for a man."

"It is not my choice," said Stepan, shortly.

"Then why do it?"

"Because Paschkin says so."

"Ah! Paschkin! Son of Satan! I, too, have felt Paschkin. He robbed me and whipped me. Tell me how it was," and as they bumped slowly along Stepan told him.

"Paschkin is the Devil," was the old man's comment when he had done, and he mused upon it for a long time.

"You have money, you say," he said at last.

"I had, — money and home and business and wife and child. Now I have this stick and I do not know if I have anything else," said Stepan, bitterly.

"If you are from Irkutsk, you should know Simon Rapin."

"I did business with him. He is an honest man."

"He is down with the fever at Krasnoiarsk. He has lain there this two months."

"Ah! Then that is what has kept Katia," said Stepan, grasping gladly at any valid reason for her delay. "I told her to deal with Simon. She is waiting for him."

"He is a hard man at a bargain, but he is honest," and they jogged on, each full of his own thoughts.

They drew near to a village at last, and the old man said: "You will stop the night with me at the inn. It is a poor inn, but it is better than none. I would talk with you. You served me, perhaps I can serve you."

And the upshot of it all was that when Peter Krop had done his business in the village, and they had had supper, he made that proposal to Stepan which opened new doors in his life, and gave him new interests, and helped to keep his heart alive.

"I believe you are an honest man, Stepan Iline," said old Peter, "and you saved my life and my goods. I make you a proposal. By order of Paschkin — may his soul rest in everlasting torment! — you must be ever on the road. We will turn it to account. You shall turn trader again, and, as you are an honest man, the curse shall turn into a blessing. I will fit you out with goods and horse and wagon, and the profits we will divide as we may agree. What do you say?"

"I say yes, Peter Krop, and I am grateful to you with all my heart."

"So! The adventure will pay me first ten per cent for my outlay, and of the rest I will take three shares and you will take one, until such time as you can save or get money of your own. Then we can rearrange."

"It is agreed and you may trust me, Peter Krop."

"I trust you or I should not have proposed it. I do

not trust people as a rule, because they are mostly knaves or fools, and I am neither one nor the other."

"There is one thing, however," said Stepan, thoughtfully. "My wife may reach her father's house at Selem-sinsk any day. I shall want to go in each month to see if she has come."

"It is dangerous," said the old man, with equal thought. "If Paschkin hears of it, you will never come out," which fact was so obvious that Stepan replied only with a nod.

"And your wife's father is —" asked Peter.

"Vasili Totsin."

"Ah!" and the word held a world of meaning, and he fell thoughtful for a space.

"I remember you now. It was in my mind that we had met. And I knew Katia Vasilievna and Marya Feodorovna. She is a shrewd hand at a bargain."

"Do you know what Vasili Totsin will do?" he asked, after further pondering.

"He will try to keep Katia and the money. But Katia will follow me. It is Katia and my little Katenka that I want. Do you think, Peter Krop, that Paschkin has prevented them coming?"

"Paschkin is capable of anything. God torment him! He robbed me of four thousand roubles and well-nigh flayed me into the bargain. Tatukof, the governor here, is bad enough and a grasping man. But he is an angel compared with Paschkin, and he is not a mad-

man. Perhaps I can get you news of your wife, Stepan Ivanovitch. Better not go to Selemsinsk again till you know that she is there."

"Get me news and I shall be grateful," said Stepan. "It crushes my heart to hear no word of them."

"You saved my life and my goods. I will do what I can," said Peter Krop.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

So a new life began for Stepan, and if only his heart had not been away in Irkutsk city, while his body perambulated the bad roads of Yeniseisk, he might still have been happy in spite of all Paschkin's decrees. For where a man's treasure is his heart is, and the one sole desire of Stepan Iline's heart was for his wife Katia and the little Katenka.

Still, Peter Krop had said he would get news of them, and the Jews were marvellous people, if sometimes rapacious beyond nature. It would take time, doubtless, for traffic between Yeniseisk and Irkutsk was not too well regulated, and Peter Krop's inquiries could only be made as opportunity served; and, like himself, Peter was ever on the move.

So he bore himself stoutly and proved himself a satisfactory trader, and that which had seemed like to break his life sat lightly upon him and in itself troubled him little. Never once had he transgressed the decree, nor had he felt as yet the desire to do so. That time was to come.

With money accumulating in his pockets, he need never lack such comforts as the villages afforded. He made many friends, too, among the cottagers who

were his customers, and even among the wilder nomads of the upper valleys and the steppes. His grave, quiet manners, the perfect fairness of all his dealings, and the harsh treatment of which he was the subject enlisted their sympathies. One and all, they were exposed to similar usage at any time, and a fellow-feeling made them kind.

He had at first feared friction with the police on account of his traversing the country more than once. Peter Krop, however, made that all right with Governor Tatukof, by means best and only known to himself and the Governor, but which would not perhaps be difficult to guess at the first attempt.

For the first few months old Peter so arranged their journeys that they met at intervals, squared accounts, rearranged their stocks, and then went on their various ways. But Peter Krop had not lived sixty-five years in a cunning world without learning men, and he trusted this man completely. And so, by degrees, the range of their travel was extended, and they met less frequently, for Peter knew that whenever they did meet, his ten per cent and his seventy-five per cent of the profits would be ready for him, and he went on his way with a mind at ease.

But all the time Stepan's heart was in Irkutsk city, and the hunger grew and grew, and bit him hard at times, and to ease it, and to occupy his spare time, he set to building that house on wheels of which he had

spoken to his mother-in-law, as a travelling shelter for his wife and child.

During the midday halts, and in the long winter evenings when the journeys were short, he wrought out his ideas bit by bit, sawing and planing, and shaping and fitting, with careful hand and cunning device, working all his heart's hunger into the little structure, and withal many a loving thought of those he hoped to see occupying it before long. It took much planning, and many months of steady, hard work, before he had all the parts complete and ready to be put together. And then he went on one of his journeys as far as Krasnoiarsk and stopped there his whole ten days, while Ivan Narasof, the famous builder of tarantases, finished the work according to his carefully thought-out ideas.

It was the most wonderful contrivance that country had ever seen, and Ivan and his men scratched their heads nearly bald, and gaped to danger point, at the strange things they were called upon to compass by Stepan's directions.

And when it was finished the people came from far and near to see it, and to gape and scratch their heads also. The general impression prevailed that it was a travelling church, or a carriage for the conveyance of holy images. And so, in sooth, it was, but not of the kind they thought, for what holier images may any man carry with him than his wife and child?

It was built on a broad, wooden platform, and the

superstructure was light, but strong and roomy. It contained a table, and seats against the walls, and cupboards and shelves. And smoother bed than the floor no one need wish, when its asperities were softened by hay-filled mattresses.

A window of thin-shaved horn at the back gave a certain light, but the front door above the horses' backs would give both light and air, and a knee-high barrier there would furnish both a seat for the driver and a safe place of observation for a pair of merry blue eyes below a sun of yellow curls and a cotton skull cap.

The wheels were broad and strong to combat rock and mud, and when the snows came they could be unshipped and replaced by runners. Oh, it was all most marvellously contrived, and no wonder it excited astonishment in Narasof and his men. They built the best tarantases in all Siberia, but they built with hand and brain, and very much more than those common things went to the making of Stepan's travelling church.

And still no news came of Katia and the child, and his heart was full of anxieties, and he began to fear that Peter Krop had forgotten, or had failed, or had perhaps come to grief, for he was making a long journey through Omsk and Tomsk, and the road always held possibilities of disaster.

It was eleven months since he parted from Katia and the little Katenka in Irkutsk city, and so very



much might happen in eleven months, or in one short hour, for that matter. He hardly dared to think of it all, for fear made his heart sick, and his face grew careworn and haggard.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

THEN one day when he was journeying south, and had compelled himself with difficulty past the point nearest to Selemsinsk, he and Peter Krop met face to face, not very far from the place where they fell across one another that first time. And old Peter sat down on the roadside at sight of the wonderful house on wheels, and in the ensuing settlement of accounts he watched warily to see if any of it had come out of his share. But even now, before he was quite satisfied that it had not, he could not but admire it greatly.

"You travel like a prince, Stepan Ivanovitch," said he.

"I built for my wife and child and with my own money," said Stepan, knowing his man. "Have you any news for me, Peter Krop?"

"They should be at Selemsinsk by this time."

"God be thanked for that!" said Stepan, fervently, and turned his horse round to start at once for Selemsinsk. The old man hitched his horse behind the house on wheels and climbed up into the front seat, and stuck his head in through the door, and marvelled at all he saw, the Tatar rugs on the walls, the dressed skins on the floor, and all the numberless little con-

trivances for comfort which Stepan's heart had devised.

"I, too, will travel like a prince for once, since it costs nothing," he said.

"Now tell me your news, Peter Krop," said Stepan, and whipped up his horses and started to follow his heart, which was already in Selemsinsk. "What has kept them so long?"

"Paschkin —"

"May his soul rest in torment!"

"God grant it! There have been other things. But chiefly Paschkin. He would not permit your wife to leave Irkutsk city. Then she had difficulties in settling up your affairs."

"They would all take advantage of my misfortune, of course."

"And Simon Rapin being ill he could not help her. But now he is better and has done what he could. Yet it is doubtful if he could have got her away but for the raiding over beyond the Tchilka, which took Paschkin down that way, and she seized the opportunity. You see, Simon could not afford to help her openly. It might have meant ruin to him. However, she was leaving Irkutsk city a month ago, and she should be at Selemsinsk by this."

"God be thanked! I will go and fetch her."

"It will be better for me to go. You run great risk. But I must go first to Minusink. I agreed to meet a

man there, and if we do not meet now, we shall not meet for a year."

"I will go for them," said Stepan.

"It is a great risk. Ten days, twelve at the most, and I will go in for them."

"My heart eats itself till I have them in my arms, Peter Krop. I will go for them myself. The risk is nothing."

The old man shook his head doubtfully, but he saw that argument would be worse than useless unless he gave up Minusink, and that his business instincts cried out against. And when the time came for them to part, he to strike off to the west while Stepan went on due north, the old man stood by his wagon in the road, still shaking his head doubtfully, and the house on wheels bumped stoutly on the way that had been appointed for it before ever it was built.

Stepan left it with a peasant, one Gnut, a half-breed Soyot, with whom he had stayed more than once and whom he could trust. He was a simple fellow, with too few wits to be dishonest, who lived all by himself in a hut on a branch of the Yenisei, and supported himself by fishing and trapping. His quiet, incurious disposition had commended itself to Stepan's sick humour, and they had become such good friends that they could sit before the fire by the hour without ever passing a word.

Then, without the loss of a moment, he struck off

across the hills to Selemsinsk. He foresaw all the difficulties, and it was borne in upon him, with each step he took, that Peter Krop's plan would have been the better one, for Peter was free to do what he chose, and his own hands were tied.

But he said to himself that he could not possibly have sat idly, with Katia and little Katenka so near at hand. His heart felt like bursting as it was. To have waited over there, while old Peter did his business in Minusink and journeyed slowly down to Selemsinsk and brought them out — bozhe-moī, that was quite too much to expect of a man! He had waited stoutly for eleven months, but those few days would have been altogether too much for him.

If Katia would come away with him at once, he would carry little Katenka and all their belongings on his back, the joyfullest load ever man carried since the world began. If she feared to make the journey in such fashion, then he would at all events have the joy of seeing them and holding them in his arms once more, and he must arrange with her for Peter Krop to come in and bring them out in his own way.

He saw just how to do it if it had to come to that, and he shortened his journey by planning it all out to the smallest detail.

Peter would hire a fast three-horse tarantas and drive through Selemsinsk, calling at Vasili Totsin's house as he went, and giving Katia her directions. The follow-

ing day he would return. Katia and Katenka, with such few things as were necessary, would be out along the road this side of the village, as far along it as possible. Peter Krop would drive up, in they would jump, and away at speed to the waiting heart and the house on wheels across the border. And then away they would go for a four months' journey into the Altai, and if the police in Yeniseisk raised any questions, Peter Krop would deal with them in his own peculiarly convincing way. Oh, yes, all would be well when once he had Katia and Katenka by his side again. And he went on merrily.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

HE lay in the hills till nightfall, till all the lights were out, till the village slept, and then stole quietly down to that house which he could have found blind-fold, that blessed little temple of rough-trimmed wood which held for him more than all the rest of the world.

He tapped on the shutter and waited. There was the usual murmur of surprise, waxing into a buzz of low talk, then a light showed with less precaution than usual, and he pinched his lips together in the dark at sight of it. Then came the usual questioning, and a quite unnecessarily long delay, and a quite unnecessary amount of noise in opening the door, as it seemed to him.

His heart was leaping wildly in his throat. She was there inside. He was sure of it.

Would that accursed door never open? Heavens and earth, he could have broken it down in half the time!

But it opened cautiously at last, and he slipped in like a shadow.

“Katia!”

“Stepan! My man, my man!” and she was in his arms, laughing, and weeping, and clinging as though

she would never let him go again, while Vasili Totsin stood by and watched them, blinking those little eyes of his more rapidly than ever, and Marya Feodorovna and Varia beamed joyfully in the happiness that radiated from them.

And then they held one another at arm's length and noted the changes eleven months had made, and then they were in one another's arms again.

"She is more beautiful than ever," thought Stepan, as his hungry eyes devoured her.

"He has suffered for want of me," thought Katia, "and now we are together, and we will not part again."

Then she slipped out of his clinging embrace and away into the back room, while the mother and Varia began hastily laying out food.

Katia came back in a moment, bearing on one arm a rosy-faced little maid whose little fists were still knuckling the sleep out of her astonished eyes, and on the other arm — wonder of wonders! and no wonder Stepan caught his breath at the sight — a chubby-faced boy of three months, too sound asleep even to welcome the father he had never set eyes on.

"Our little Stepan," said Katia, with mighty motherly pride.

"Now, God be praised! I am richer than I thought," choked Stepan, in his great astonishment.

The little Katenka stretched two welcoming arms to him, and he caught her to him and buried her in his



beard, and looked over her at his namesake with misty eyes.

And then there came a sudden peremptory knock on the outer door, and, in the chill silence that fell upon them, a harsh voice sounded outside demanding entrance in the name of the law.

The eyes of the women, sparkling like stars one minute, filled the next with amazed fears, and their faces fell, drawn and white. Vasili Totsin's eyes blinked furiously and he took a step toward the door. Stepan Iline laid Katenka quickly in her mother's arms, kissed Katia over the children, whispered a word in her ear, and blew out the light, as the hilt of a sword beat again on the outer door.

Totsin, decent, law-abiding man, was already fumbling at the bolts, and presently succeeded in opening it, and a police officer and half-a-dozen men came in and closed the door behind them.

"Now what is this, Vasili Vasilievitch? What was a light doing in your house at this time of night when honest folks are all asleep? Light that lamp, and let us see what is toward."

The lamp flickered out at last, on the faces of the trembling women, and on Totsin gaping and blinking like a light-bird roused suddenly from sleep.

The chief glanced quickly round and strode to the inner room. He poked in dark corners with his sword and swore briskly, but came back empty-handed.

"Well, are you all dumb?" he shouted, and the children began to cry.

"It was the children, Excellency," murmured Marya Feodorovna, recovering her wits. "They were crying so that we feared they were ill. We were going to warm some —"

"Search the house," to his men, and they turned it upside down, while the women stood trembling, and the children wailed, and the officer looked sourly at Totsin and wondered whether he was most knave or fool. And Vasili blinked deprecatingly back at him, and shifted from one bare foot to the other, and said nothing.

And out in the night a man was speeding silently toward the hills, sobbing with fury till he choked again, and cursing that treacherous blinker in the house, for he knew that he had betrayed him for sake of the money Katia had brought with her.

By a miracle he had escaped the snare. In a flash, as the light went out, he saw the one bare chance of escape, and took it. He slipped to the side of the opening door, and as the last of the police came in, he slipped out.

But the treachery was there all the same, and it bit into his soul, and he loathed the very thought of Vasili Totsin save as a subject for most vehement cursing.

## CHAPTER XL

ILINE pushed on without a halt all through the night, possessed by the fury that was in him. Had he met a man with blinking eyes, resembling Vasili Totsin ever so remotely, it would have gone hard with him. At times the recollection of Katia's starry eyes, and the rosy little Katenka, and that new, little, round-faced wonder came upon him, and he sobbed between joy and disappointment, and alternately thanked God and cursed Vasili Totsin. He was like a man dying of hunger, to whom a full plate is offered and then capriciously snatched away.

He went on all through the day, drinking now and again from the mountain streams, but loathing thought of food, and so came, the next night, to Gnut's cottage, and fell on Gnut's bed and slept for twenty-four hours, and woke himself and very hungry.

He ate like a January wolf, harnessed his horses, made Gnut happy with a bright new axe and a knife, and set off to find Peter Krop.

On the fourth day toward Minusink he came upon Peter hurrying to meet him and vastly relieved at sight of him.

"I was full of fears for you, Stepan Ivanovitch,"

said Peter, looking at the house on wheels for sight of Katia. "I am right glad to see you. How have you fared?"

Stepan told him.

"I never did trust Vasili Totsin," was all Peter's comment, and then they laid their heads together for the enlargement of Katia and the children.

Three days later Vasili Totsin received a message, early in the morning, from a man with whom he had been endeavouring to negotiate a loan, and who lived at Tertsaya, some eight miles away on the Irkutsk road. He set off at speed and in very good spirits, and did not get back till nightfall, very puzzled, very angry, and no better off than when he started.

He had not been gone an hour when Peter Krop's wagon, emptied of everything but some sacks half filled with hay, and drawn by three horses yoked abreast, drew lightly up to Totsin's house, and old Peter asked for Vasili. Mrs. Totsin came to the door, no longer hearty and cheerful, but red-eyed and worried-looking, and told him that Vasili was away.

"I know it, Marya Feodorovna," said old Peter, softly. "It was I that sent him. I come from Stepan Ivanovitch for Katia Vasilievna and the children."

"Ah!" and Marya's usual motherly face began to show through the gloom.

"Listen now!" said Peter, impressively. "Two hours from now I shall be passing here again. If you

have any small parcels you wish me to take, I can stop for half a minute at your door and you can throw them in. If Katia and the children should be by the roadside as far out of the village as possible — why, they might like a ride. You understand?"

"I understand. God be good to you, Peter Krop! You take a load off my heart. Never will I beat down your prices again as long as I live. At least —"

"In two hours," and Peter drove on through the village, first for a friendly chat with the chief of police, for it was an essential part of his business policy to keep on the right side of all who could make themselves unpleasant but were open to reason, then out beyond it, till he could see Vasili Totsin's figure in the distance as he plodded hopefully along the hill road to Tertsaya to negotiate a loan with a man who would not have lent him a kopek to save his life.

There was just the shadow of a smile in Peter Krop's deep eyes as he watched him. Then he got down and took the bits out his horses' mouths and gave them some oats and some hay out of one of the sacks, and when two hours had passed he drove quietly back through Selemsinsk, stopped for scarce a moment at Totsin's house — just long enough for Marya Feodorovna to fling two or three small bundles into the wagon and a meaning nod to himself, — and then he went on along the highroad.

At last he saw a moving figure on in front, and as he

watched it a smaller figure ran out from it and crossed the road, and he had found what he had come for.

Only a young woman with a bright, anxious face, and a laughing child, and a sleeping baby, but all heaven and earth to the hungry heart that counted the slow hours up in Yeniseisk, and said to itself: "Now he should be there. Now they should have started. Now they should be coming. Why don't they come? It is time. It is time," — and then, at last, the merry beat of the galloping hoofs, loud and soft, on rock and mud, — oh, the cheer of the rushing feet which brought him the good news before he could see them! And so at last, at last, with a sob from an overstrained heart, — "Now, God be praised, they are here!"

Of that meeting how shall any man properly tell? How they laughed and how they cried. How they clung to one another as though defying any earthly power to part them again for ever. How they kissed one another as though kisses alone, and in very great quantity, could wipe out the bitter memories of eleven long months of heart-starvation. How little Katenka danced round and round them like a chubby, distraught elf, laughing and crying because they did, and clutching wildly first at one and then at the other. How even Peter Krop's keen eyes swam a little in their deep caverns as he watched them patriarchally, and held little Stepan in his arms, in gingerly and unaccustomed fashion, to give them freer play. Perhaps the thought

of other men-children he had held in his arms long ago, and none since, proved too much for him. For, of a sudden, he became a man of business again. He laid Stepan Stepanovitch in his mother's arms, and set to work shifting the goods and the horses.

And presently he stood in the road by his wagon and watched the house on wheels bumping away toward the Altai as fast as two horses could carry it, and he felt himself strangely alone.

And Stepan carried in his breast, where he had stuffed it, a paper which Peter had handed to him, saying, "That is on account of my debt to you, Stepan Ivanovitch."

And Stepan, thinking at first that it was material payment of some kind, had been for refusing it.

"You have this day repaid me ten times over, Peter Petrovitch," he said. And then he glanced at the paper and stuffed it into his breast, and said: "God be good to you, Peter Krop. A Jew shall be my friend wherever I meet him from this day for your sake."

Great was the power of money, and almost as great was Governor Tatukof's constant need of it. The paper was Tatukof's permission for Katia Vasilievna to travel with her husband, Stepan Iline, within the province of Yeniseisk. It had cost Peter Krop a thousand roubles, and for once he did not regret the paying out of money, even to Tatukof.

## CHAPTER XLI

THE Altai Mountains are very beautiful at that time of year, but had they been the starkest desolation they would still have been heaven to these newly-wedded souls, for we make our own heavens and carry them with us where we will.

Governor Paschkin's decree hung lightly upon the travellers and gave them as yet no cause for concern. Life, as though to make up for the breaks and shallows of the past, flowed smooth and deep, and their love touched heights it had never known before.

Day after day they wound slowly up among the hills, a little wandering microcosm of pure distilled happiness. They had all they wanted, and more than ever they had dared to hope for again. The storm had broken over them, but now, for a season, the sun shone out warm and bright, and by contrast seemed to them even brighter than before.

Stepan marched at his horses' heads, for their encouragement on the long up-grades, and talked and laughed out of the fulness of his heart to them and to Katenka and to Katia, and even to little Stepan, who could not understand a word, but nevertheless replied in kind.



To please Katenka, he fitted the high wooden arch over the neck of his shaft horse with bells, not just common bells such as any horse might wear, but bells chosen with very great care, — a deep-toned “crimson” in the middle, and sweet, silvery tinklers at the sides, so that the sound of their going was a sound of sweet music, which chimed along the hillsides and floated down the valleys and was very good to hear.

And little Katenka was happy as the day was long. She flitted like a humming-bird from patch to patch of brilliant colour along the hillsides, and came speeding back with mighty treasure of fruit and flower, — wild raspberries and strawberries, gentians, pinks, forget-me-nots, roses, — and full of merry chatter over her discoveries, till the house on wheels looked like a travelling garden and sounded like a cage of twittering love-birds.

And Katia sat in the doorway of the house with little Stepan in her arms, and watched all that passed with eyes of deep content and a heart brimming with gratitude and hope. And sometimes she sang softly to herself and Baby Stepan, and then the very horses trod lightly and put back their ears, and seemed to slacken their speed so that they might listen, and Stepan said to himself that the good angels in heaven could sing no sweeter than that, and perhaps he was right.

And, bit by bit, Katia told Stepan of all her troubles and anxieties after he left Irkutsk city. How the men

who owed them money took advantage of his absence to dispute with her, and to get off payment altogether when they could. So that it was only when Simon Rapin recovered from his illness that she was able to make any headway. And finally, in despair, she was glad to sell everything, stock and debts and business and furniture, to Simon for a round sum of two thousand roubles and an undertaking to see her and the money and the children safely conveyed to Selemsinsk.

Then came the birth of little Stepan and Paschkin's interference with her going and more delays, till she lost heart at times and doubted if ever she would see her husband again.

She told him, too, how her mother had penetrated her father's treachery, and of the trouble it had made in the home.

"She will never forgive him, Stepan, and he knows it," said Katia. "She is an honest woman, is my mother, and ones does not forget a thing like that."

"Since you are here, my Katenka, I forgive everybody, even Paschkin," said Stepan, forcefully; "and as to the money, the sight of your face up there is more to me than all the money in all the world. There are some things you can't buy with money, and, God be thanked, I've got them!"

Nevertheless the money was useful, since it enabled him to buy his own goods, and quadrupled his profits, and set him fairly on his own feet.

At sunset each day, they would choose some quiet place off the road, and there Stepan turned the horses loose to nibble where they would, and lighted a fire of the sticks he had been gathering as he walked; and Baby Stepan lay on Grandmother Earth and kicked and squealed in the ecstasy of living; and little Katenka mothered him with responsible gravity; and Katia got ready their simple meal.

They had camped so one evening, in a sheltered nook of the forest, and Stepan, when he had lighted his fire of sticks, had gone off after a supply of dry wood for the night, as the trees near at hand were sturdy oaks in full growth.

When he came back dragging a bundle of dead branches, the sight of the cheerful little encampment stayed him in the edge of the wood, with a grateful lump in his throat, and a sudden mist in his eyes, and a swelling about the heart that was, in very truth, a thankful prayer, though it had no words.

The horses, in their hobbles, were rooting greedily among the withered grasses for the tender shoots below. Baby Stepan lay on a skin rug, kicking his sturdy legs in joyous freedom, and goo-gooing at the dancing flames and at little Katenka, who sat on the ground beside him and sprinkled the kicking legs with her day's harvest of flowers, and babbled to her mother, who was busy over the big black-pot.

As happy a sight as a man might see, and, for one who

had feared his life's happiness passed for ever, a sight, indeed, to bring a choking lump into the throat and a mist to the eyes and a swelling inside the chest.

The dark wood behind him was like the black time of waiting, when his life seemed broken in pieces, and he doubted if he would ever see happiness again. But he had come out of the darkness, and here he stood looking out into the light, and the future seemed as bright as the dancing flames and the happiness they shone upon.

He stood so long, silent and motionless, watching through the leaves, and half afraid to move lest it should all vanish and leave him heart empty and starving, that another tiny observer lost its fear of him, and came tripping noiselessly along a branch almost under his hand, and lay staring with tense little brown body and astonished little beads of eyes at the fire and all the very unusual goings-on about it.

And Stepan, thinking always of what would give pleasure to his little Katenka, dropped his hand on the little brown body, which wriggled and bit and squeaked, and went forward to the fire with it in one hand and dragging his dry branches with the other.

"See, then, dushenka," he said to little Katenka. "Here's for you to play with — a little brown brother of the woods."

"Is it alive, little father?" asked Katenka, with wide round eyes of wonder, as the little brown bundle lay quite still for a moment.

"Oh, yes, it's alive," and he held it by the bushy tail while it tried frantically to bite him into letting it go.

"Its little nose is frightened and its eyes. Will it bite, little father?"

"Oh, yes, it bites. See, it has made my finger bleed."

"But you will not kill it, little father, although it has made you bleed."

"Kill it, my little Katenka? No, I will not kill it. It's teeth are sharp, but it only bites for freedom. No, I will not kill it."

"Pretty, pretty!" said Katenka, proffering friendship with a doubtful finger, but withdrawing it hastily before the menacing little teeth. "Can I keep it, little father? How can I keep it?"

"It is for you, dushenka. I will make it a cage."

"Nay, but my Katenka," said Katia, looking pitifully on the struggling little captive, "maybe it has a little Katenka and a Baby Stepan, and a longing Katia up there in the branches, and they will die if it does not go back to them."

And little Katenka looked up at the face above her, with quivering lip and a great tenderness in the dark blue eyes, and said quickly: "Let it go, little father, let it go! We will not be like the evil Paschkin and keep it from its little Katenka and its Baby Stepan, or their little mother's eyes will be red with weeping. Let it go, little father!"

And Stepan set it down on the ground, and it lay for a second and then vanished like a shadow. And little Katenka clapped her hands gleefully.

“It has gone back to its little Katenka and its Baby Stepan and their little mother,” she cried. “And the little mother’s eyes will no longer be red with weeping.”

And many times thereafter he caught for her tiny wood-doves with eyes like bright beads, swelling, fluttering little bundles of gleaming feathers, and timid, startled-eyed furry things, all with quivering noses, and some with bushy tails, and some with nothing but little white patches where tails ought properly to have been.

And little Katenka was always full of wonder and delight in them.

But Katia always said: “Let them go, Stepan! It pains my heart to see them, for I know what it is to be caged.”

And then little Katenka would say, “Yes, let them go, little father, let them go, for there is a little Katenka and a Baby Stepan and a little mother waiting for them up there in the branches.”

And Stepan would laugh and let them go, and would say, “Yes, I will let them go, for I have the prettiest birds of all, and them I will never let go.”

To please the little one without troubling their tender hearts, he took to fashioning rude toys for her out of fit pieces of wood which he cut out of the branches as they

passed along. And, ever eager for the merry laugh and sparkling eyes which greeted any unusual effort, he grew in time quite skilful at the business.

And Katia, sitting in the doorway, with Baby Stepan in her arms, would smile to herself at the concentration of his knitted face as he cut and carved as he walked along, while little Katenka at her knee would keep crying eagerly: "Is it finished, little father? Is it finished? Oh, what is it this time? Is it a man, or is it a little beast, or is it the evil Paschkin?"

And it was wonderful the things he made for her out of fir cones and acorns and bits of crooked wood, and she treasured them and played with them by the hour, and when they were broken, she passed them on to Baby Stepan, who knew no better and found them past his understanding.

And at times her father gave her joggling rides on the shafter's back, in delightful proximity to the swinging bells, and never did the bells sing so sweetly as when little Katenka sat in joyful trepidation beside them, with hands clapping and eyes sparkling, and fair curls blowing in the wind.

After that long heart-starving and agony of doubt, now that the joy of his dear ones had been given to him again, it seemed as though he could not do enough for them. There was room for but one thought in him at that time, and that was how to fill their lives with happiness to the very brim. And for that no trouble was too

great. Trouble! — for Katia and little Katenka and Baby Stepan! Trouble! Everything he did for them was highest delight and joy unspeakable.

Now and again they shared their evening meal with some solitary prowler, whose longing eyes were all-sufficient passport to the charmed circle; and such, knowing nothing of what had gone before, went on their way wondering why to some men came so much of happiness and to some so much of trouble.

And more than once they fell in with bands of wanderers from over the border, strange beings with round, flat faces and uncouth garments and incomprehensible speech, but not ill-disposed, and all alike compact of curiosity and diffidence.

And never once did they suffer molestation either at the hands of their own or the stranger people. For the latter knew that behind the white people of the northern land were bands of ruthless soldiers who could wipe the steppes bare.

And for the others, if temptation ever assailed them at sight of happiness so much greater than ever could be theirs, Stepan's stalwart figure and determined face, and the sharp axe in his belt, and the long gun which lay to his hand in the door of his house were all-sufficient deterrents. Besides, except to casual wanderers, whose tastes or whose fears inclined them to solitude rather than to the society of their fellows, his story had become known, and few but felt for him,



since his burden might be theirs any day, and not one would have added to it.

That his cross had become a crown, and his burden had turned his life into a joyous pilgrimage, few understood, and the rest would hardly have believed.

## CHAPTER XLII

THAT was a summer of high delight to the occupants of the house on wheels, and all things prospered with them.

They met old Peter Krop whenever their orbits permitted, even at the sacrifice of business and a few days' extra travelling to some appointed place. And, whenever they did meet, the welcome they gave him warmed the old man's heart and sent him on his way lonelier than before, yet rejoicing in spite of his loneliness.

Stepan and he discussed their business, past and future, and exchanged profitable ideas as to routes and goods. Katia and the children knocked thirty years off his age, and carried him back to the times that had been and could never be again. And, when they had parted once more, though he felt his loneliness the greater, yet he rejoiced in their great happiness and in the hand he had had in bringing it all about.

And everywhere, along the line of their journeying, they carried with them such an atmosphere of cheerful contentment with a hard lot, and even of happiness, that the stolid country folk, though they could not understand if, were always glad to see them.

They came running out of their houses to meet the house on wheels whenever they heard its bells, and the full round voice of the deep-toned crimson and the merry peal of the silvery tinklers were known and welcomed over all the lonely plains of Yeniseisk. "Nu, then, but aren't you crowded in there?" the frowsy housewives of the steppe would say to Katia, as they gazed in wonder at her bright face.

"Come and see," she would laugh, and they would climb up and peep in, and she would show them all Stepan's clever devices for their comfort, and they would gape and admire and never cease to talk of it.

"Da, now! If our men were like that!" they would say, and they would envy her her clever man, not knowing all the heartbreak and bitterness which had gone to the making of the house on wheels and the happiness it held.

They were fully and absolutely happy, as they had never hoped to be again; happier, indeed, than they had been in Irkutsk, or ever could have been under the perpetual shadow of Paschkin. And when they spoke of the black days, it was with regret for those who had still to live in that great darkness, and with mighty thankfulness at their own strange deliverance.

At first Stepan had watched Katia anxiously for any sign of discontent with their restless life. But his heart was soon at rest.

“Art certain thou art content, little one?” he would ask her, time and again.

“What does my face tell thee?” she would laugh. “I would sooner tramp the bad roads of Yeniseisk on foot, with thee and the little ones, than live in the biggest house in Irkutsk while Paschkin rules there. And this nest thou hast made for us is like heaven.”

“Ay, they thought it was a travelling church I built,” he told her.

“And so it was,” said she, with a touch of prescience. “And we are thy holy images.”

“It is true,” he said solemnly. “When I see thee sitting up there, with the little one on thy knee, I think of the Holy Mother and The Child, and I think she must have been like thee,” and it harmed neither of them so to think.

## CHAPTER XLIII

THEIR summer waxed and waned, and they travelled through a crisper air. The hilltops began to be powdered with snow. The poplars turned crimson, and the white-stemmed birches flamed like burning bushes among the dark evergreens. The grasses had all been burnt down by the sun into a carpet of russet gold, except in the swampy bottoms where there were still green patches, and even flowers might still be had for the seeking. The skies became gray and heavy, and Stepan turned his horses' heads toward the plains and began to think of runners instead of wheels.

He had wanted Katia and the children to stop in some small town or village for the winter, but Katia would not hear of it.

"We will part no more, Stepan," she said. "The last time nearly killed me."

"It is cold on the road when the snow lies deep, Katia; how will you and the little ones stand it?"

"We can stand anything so long as we are together. We can make the house as comfortable as any village house."

"We may be snowed up at times."

"It is delightful to be snowed up when all you love is snowed up with you."

Stepan was doubtful, but decided that if they found it too much for them, it would always be possible to make a change.

Old Peter Krop, too, when he heard about it, strongly urged Katia to consent to being left behind. He had travelled those roads for thirty years; but always, in the winter — after the first year or two — he knocked off for a time, because he considered the risk and the hardship too great.

But he could not move Katia, and so he tried to induce Stepan to go west into Omsk and Tomsk, and there keep down to the south. But Stepan did not think well of the idea. Governor Tatukof was complaisant and had never interfered with him. In Omsk and Tomsk he did not know in whose hands he might be. He would stop where he knew he was safe, and where no one was likely to come between him and Katia.

And so they went stoutly into the winter, and Katia, at all events, had no doubt but that the warmth of love inside the little house would be sufficient to keep out all the cold the season could bring against them.

Stepan bought more skins for the floor and more rugs for the walls, and from a trader, whose business took him far north down the Yenisei, he bought a large lamp such as the natives there use for both lighting and heating and cooking.

They made but slow time indeed, when the snow came and the wheels gave place to the runners. But

time was of little consequence to them; so long as they fulfilled the requirements of Paschkin's decree and kept moving on, there was none to find fault with them.

At times they stopped in wayside village or alongside some lonely peasant hut for days at a time, but Katia always preferred her own house to any other.

Far from complaining, she would never even admit any want of room or of anything else. On the contrary, she went about her work with happy face and cheerful songs, and planned and contrived so admirably that everybody had room enough, and everybody was comfortable and happy.

And to little Katenka the world was as joyous, all glistening in the snow, as it had been in the days of sunshine and flowers.

She would sit on the seat in front, muffled in a sheep-skin so that nothing of her could be seen but her rosy face in its little cloth capote, and a fair curl streaming out here and there like a winter sunbeam. And they could not keep her inside.

She would sit there by the hour, singing merrily to the falling flakes, and nodding gay welcomes to them with her bright little head.

And when they fell on her face so thickly that she could not see, she would root out a little mittened hand and brush them gently away, as though the soft white flakes had feelings which she was loath to wound; but

really, if they didn't much mind, she wanted to see out of her own eyes, you know.

And to Stepan, tramping sturdily by his horses' heads, and clearing their faces of the snow when it troubled them, she was ever a rare delight. No matter how cold the wind, how thick the snow, the sight of little Katenka, sitting up there singing to the falling flakes as they fluttered by her rosy face, set a cheerful fire in his heart and brightened all the way. Just so, long ago, to a little mud-boy on the long road, the thought of another little Katenka's rosy face had been warmth and food and new life, and a wondrous easing of an infinitely gloomier way.

Katenka wondered sometimes why he would suddenly look up at her and laugh joyfully.

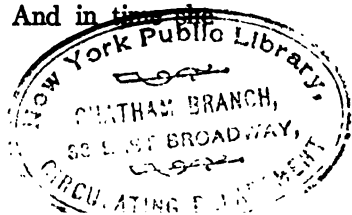
"Why do you laugh at me, little father, why do you laugh?" she would pipe down through the falling flakes.

"Because your face is brighter than the sun to me, little Katenka, and it always sets me thinking of that hot cake you gave me when I was a little mud-boy, sixteen, seventeen — oh, ever so many years ago, — before you were born."

"Da! You are a funny little father! How could I — before I was born?"

"Nu, then! Ask your mother to tell you the story of the dirty mud-boy and little Katenka's hot cake."

And the story was told many, many times, and little Katenka never tired of hearing it. And in time she





got to know it so well that, if her mother inadvertently dropped one word, Katenka would insist upon its immediate replacement before the story could be allowed to continue.

And sometimes, as a crowning effect, the little mother would bake them hot cakes, just the same as the one she had given to the little mud-boy, and little Katenka would look anxiously about to see if there was any starving little mud-boy upon whom she might bestow hers, but she never found one. But the sight of her father's face, as he ate his cake, crumb by crumb, always filled her with merry laughter and her mother with great delight, for he always asserted that even the original cake given to the mud-boy was not equal to these cakes. And in that, I suppose, he was right.

At times they crept through the winding hill passes, where the firs and pines stood like endless phalanxes of white-coated soldiers, silently saluting their merry chimes. And then down into the long white solitudes of the plains, which sparkled under the sun as though strewn with dust of diamonds. And sometimes they passed long lines of laden sledges, and sometimes they went for days without seeing any living thing.

But always when he could, Stepan drew in for the night to hut or village, where the horses could get under cover and his mind could be at ease. And then, indeed, the little house glowed like the cosey nest of some strange birds, and the peasants came out into the snow

to peep in at the furs and rugs and the warmth and neatness of it all, and sat and talked with Stepan and Katia, as many as could get in; and crept back to their own cheerless dwellings the better for what they had seen, and envious in some cases almost to the point of emulation. But after a time, and taught by lively experience, Katia had to put a stop to so much hospitality; for she was the soul of cleanliness herself, and many of their visitors left active memories of their visits behind them.

When no house could be reached, Stepan sought the most sheltered spot he could find and camped out. His stabling arrangements then were simple enough. They took time to carry out, but the horses found them satisfactory and made no complaint.

He drew over the roof of the house a great piece of canvas and fastened the ends to the ground or to the snow, so making a small lean-to tent on each side. The ends were closed with shaped pieces of canvas, and when the snow was shovelled out, and piled in a wall round the outside, and the ground was covered with fir branches, the stable was complete, and the horses would sleep more soundly than their master. For he would lie awake most of the night dreading each moment to hear the distant howling of wolves, and if by chance he fell asleep, he woke with a start, sure that he heard them coming.

But they suffered little actual trouble from wolves,

except in Stepan's dreams, until the great snowstorm which caught them on the road from Chernsk to Drem — the greatest storm they had had in Yeniseisk for very many years.

## CHAPTER XLIV

It was a clear sky and no signs of any unusual visitation when they started out from Chernsk, and Drem was four days away across a frozen, swampy steppe on the other side of the hills. They had stayed their full ten days at Chernsk, waiting for snow to level the ways, and, for the first time since Paschkin started them on the road, the police had had to intimate to Stepan that his time was up and he must go.

He had wondered sometimes if they would actually enforce Paschkin's arbitrary decree in Yeniseisk. Tatukof winked at Katia's presence with him. Stepan thought it possible he might equally wink at the other matter also, and had more than once so discussed the matter at his meetings with Peter Krop.

But Peter advised him to the contrary. He said he had done his utmost to get the Governor's other eye to close, but Tatukof was too wary and would take no risks. As regards Katia he had received no communication from the All-Powerful-One, who was occupied with other matters at the time of her escape. If at any time instructions came concerning her, he would have to enforce them. He had, of course, long since spent his thousand roubles when he made this acknowledgment.

But as regarded the indorsement of Stepan Iline's papers, it was a matter beyond him. Every police officer with whom those papers were lodged at each village was conversant with them, and was bound to act on them or take the consequences, and he, Tatukof, was not quite such a fool as to meddle with the written decrees of Paschkin. So that it was really the Ubiquitous and All-Powerful-One who drove them into the great snowstorm, and brought them into mighty peril, and worse.

Captain of Cossacks Danof, head of police at Chernsk, was an autocratic respecter of laws and ordinances, a person devoid of sentiment or imagination, a hard man of few but fixed ideas, chief of which was that superior orders must be carried out to the very last letter, no matter what happened. This made him a good chief of police but an extremely unpleasant person to deal with. He was a man of ambitions, also, and not open even to the reasoning of the rouble. He had seen the danger of that, and had made up his mind that until he occupied a position which would command commensurate remuneration, honesty was his best policy. He would have nothing to do with bribes of any kind until they should be on such a scale that consequences would be of comparatively small importance.

He was the first who had had to enforce against Stepan the indorsement on his papers. On the tenth day of their stay in Chernsk, a message arrived from him

to the effect that the term of their residence expired that night, and Stepan forthwith harnessed his horses and went.

They had crossed the frozen swamp and were crawling up the pass, when the snow began falling in slow, heavy flakes out of a low, gray sky. The sky darkened over the hills, and presently the wind came bellowing through the funnel of the pass, blinding the horses, plastering the house inches deep with snow, and piling up drifts at every turning, which soon made progress impossible.

Stepan remembered a corner down below which had been somewhat sheltered. He got the horses round, to their great satisfaction, and they struggled back to the corner. Then he had a stiff wrestle with the intractable canvas, which, under the influence of the gale, became possessed of a devil such as had never entered into it before. After a couple of hours' hard work, however, he got the horses under shelter and was satisfied. Then he crept to cover himself, and lay all night listening to the howling of the wind through the pass, till at last it dulled on his ears and he slept.

Everything was very quiet when he woke in the morning, and he said to himself that the storm was over and they would go on. But when he tried to open the front door he met resistance, and forcing it an inch or two found the snow piled heavily against it.

He scraped away with his hands through the narrow opening till he could creep out, burrowed on till his

head broke through the upper crust, and there he found the storm still raging, and the snow piling higher and higher round his corner even as he watched.

He looked anxiously over his canvas stables and found them so far intact. The outer one was sagged down with a covering of snow a foot or more deep. The inner one, sheltered by the house and the side of the pass, was less weighted. So far the stout canvas had stood the strain, but he set to work at once to lighten it by pushing down the snow with a pole. He burrowed down to the inside stable and crept under the house to the other, and found both horses all right and fairly warm. He gave them hay from the provision under the house and climbed up again.

"We are snowed in, Katia," he said to his wife, "and the storm still rages."

"We might be worse off, Stepan. There is plenty of food and plenty of oil, and before long the storm will cease, and we can go on."

"Pretty, pretty!" said little Katenka, clapping her hands at sight of the snow-wall outside the door, glittering in the lamplight.

But the storm raged all that day, and the next, and for many days after that. Flakes as big as one's hand went whirling down the pass, banking in great ridges at the turnings, and piling higher and higher round the little camp in the corner. And Stepan was kept busy, raking it off the roofs of the house and the stables when

it packed too heavily, lest they should be overwhelmed, and keeping open his funnel lest they should be smothered.

He carried the big cooking lamp down into the stable for a time each day, and so tightly were they covered in that very little of the heat escaped, and they had no great cold to complain of.

"But," he said to himself, as he looked out over the piling drifts, "it will take days and days to get clear, even when the snow ceases," and he began to worry about the provisioning for themselves and the horses. The latter he put on short rations at once as a matter of precaution, but as yet said nothing to Katia.

For himself he ate just as little as possible without exciting her observation, and, as the days went on, the habit grew upon him of getting up while eating, and going out with the food in his hand, to clear the snow off the stable roof, which he could have done just as well at any other time.

As the days passed, and the snow still fell, Katia's gentle face began to wear an anxious look also, when she was alone. For the food was nearly done, and what was to happen when they had eaten the last mouthful she dared not think. But she always plucked up heart, and said to herself that there could not be much more snow left to come down, and that soon it would be all right, and they would go on again.

She was very much astonished, too, at the way the



food lasted. Positively it seemed to her sometimes that there was more there in the morning than there had been at night. She herself ate very sparingly, and would have denied herself still more but that she had little Stepan to feed as well as herself, and his masterful demands had to be complied with, no matter who went short. She could not altogether keep the growing anxiety out of her face at last, and Stepan noticed it, and that her cheeks had lost somewhat of their roundness, and he insisted on her eating more.

Then she would say, "If you will eat, I will eat." And he had to humour her, and God knows — except for fears of the future — it was not hard work for him to eat when his stomach was almost clapping its insides with hunger.

"How much longer can it last, Stepan?" she would ask, and he would reply: "God knows, little one. But I really think the sky is lighter to-day."

When she saw that the oil was nearly done she cooked all the meat they had, and made all their flour into cakes, against the time when they could cook no more. And Stepan, as he dealt out single stalks of hay to his famished horses, and shrank from the hungry reproach of their straining eyes, found himself wondering if the time had not come for him to kill one of them for sake of the little flesh that was on its bones. They had long since eaten up all their bedding, to the last shred of bark, and there was not a scrap of anything

left, except the stalks of hay which he dealt out so sparingly.

Little Katenka grew fretful with the long confinement, the pretty snow had long since lost its charm, and even little Stepan wailed discontentedly at times in spite of all his mother could do for him.

Stepan blamed himself bitterly for not having insisted on their stopping for the winter in some village, and starved himself contritely. And Katia suffered much, and did her very best to look as if she were not suffering at all, but strength soon saps when two have to live on a fraction of what would support one.

Then at last one day, when he burst through the new crust of snow that had covered his breathing hole in the night, he found the sun shining brightly and the storm over. The pass was blocked at every turning, and it would be many days before they could get out. But he hastily cleft a larger way through the snow, and brought Katia and Katenka and Baby Stepan out to breathe the fresh air and stretch themselves, to their great content.

Katenka began at once to complain of hunger, and Stepan, with sudden resolution, but feeling how reduced his strength was, climbed the nearest drift to see if he could spy any trees. He saw some firs sticking up through the snow, and plunged away toward them, and began wildly tearing branches down and dragging them toward the house.

He set Katia and Katenka to strip off the leaves, and then quickly, for he hated the job, he slipped down into the stable, crept under the house, and with shaking hand and eyes that hardly saw, drew his knife across the throat of the horse that lay there.

The poor beast shivered and half raised its head to look up at him, kicked feebly once or twice with its hind legs, and lay still. And the other horse, with its muzzle down to the opening below the house, snuffled affrightedly and asked what was the matter. When Stepan came out from under the house with red meat in his hand, it turned and looked reproachfully after him.

Katia went white when she saw the meat, but little Katenka clapped her hands with joy and danced briefly in the snow. Meat had come, that was enough. She never asked where it came from.

Stepan trod down a patch of snow into a hard cake, piled his wood, and lit a fire, and set the meat to grill, and then carefully carried down to the live horse the twigs and leaves from the fir branches.

The meat was not to their taste, not even to little Katenka's, and Katia forced herself to swallow it only for the boy's sake. It was coarse and stringy, and of a strange flavour, still there was some nourishment in it, and when Katia stewed some and mixed her dried herbs with it, they found it better.

They had been eighteen days under the snow, and

it was ten days more before they could make passage through the drifts.

Said Stepan with a brief smile, "There are powers greater even than Paschkin's."

## CHAPTER XLV

It was then, almost at the end of their long imprisonment, when they had barely escaped death by starvation, that they came still nearer to it in still more grisly fashion.

Stepan had decided that they might venture down the pass on the morrow. They were busily packing such necessaries as they required into small bundles, for the house would have to wait where it was for the present. The snow was piled high about it, and to enter it they had to pass through a narrow passage twenty feet long which Stepan had cut through the drift. He had been working all day at another passage by which the horse would come up to daylight again in the morning. For sake of the warmth, however, he had not yet broken it completely through, but a short half-hour's work would finish it.

Suddenly he raised his head and sat listening intently, with a quick chill at the heart. Katia was busy with little Stepan and did not notice. The horse in the stable alongside gave a terrified snort. He heard it, too.

It was the sound Stepan had heard so often in his dreams, the distant howling of wolves. He reached

for the long knife with which he had cut the horse's throat, and lashed it firmly to the pole he used for beating the snow off the stable roof. He felt for his axe. His gun was in the corner. Then he sat and listened.

He heard it again, and nearer. It was not the long, dolorous howl of the hungry prowler, but the short, eager yelp of the pack hot on the scent.

Katia heard it now, and her thin white face went whiter still, and involuntarily she clasped little Stepan tighter to her breast. The horse alongside was on its feet. They could hear it shifting uneasily, and snorting with fear. Little Katenka heard it, and began to cry with her hands to her ears.

For the first time in his life her father spoke roughly to her.

"Be quiet, Katenka. If you cry, the wolves will hear you," and Katenka drew a skin round her head and lay wriggling in a corner.

"They cannot get in, Katia," he said positively. "But I am afraid for the horse. I shall stand outside in the passage. If they come here, and I have to shoot, you must reload the gun for me. There is the powder. Here is the shot. There are wads," and he stepped through into the snow passage, carrying gun and spear and axe. Katenka gave a quiver of fear as the door opened and the blood-curdling yelping sounded louder still and nearer.

There was a cold bright moon like a silver shield, and Stepan could see to the next turn of the pass. The yelping swelled clearer, drew nearer, and now he heard also the quick thud of a horse's hoofs going at a frantic gallop. He must see. If the chase kept up, they might be passed unscented, though if they were, it would be by the mercy of God, for, good sooth, the scent of them was strong enough.

He stole to the end of the passage. The night was very still, and now he could hear the sobbing breath of the horse as it gasped its heart out in the death race. The quick thud of the hoofs came, now sharp on wind-swept rock, now dull on drifted snow, then lost as it plunged through a drift. There was the clank of swinging steel, and above and behind it all the marrow-freezing gasps and yelps of the bloody fangs.

Nearer, nearer, and in a moment they tore past him, a saddled horse, mad terror in every bristling gray hair of him, a score of bounding shadows at his heels.

"Please God he keep up!" breathed Stepan. Then — "God help us, he's down!" — a short-cut, curdling scream, a chorus of triumphant yells, then silence, broken by snarlings and snappings, and rendings and tearings, and sudden angry yelps as the starveling crew fell foul of one another in their greed.

Stepan fell back down the passage and cocked his gun. He rested his spear against the snow wall and loosened the axe in his belt. The house behind him

was silent. The horse snuffled and shifted on its feet, and Stepan strained his ears into the night.

They were still busy down there, rending and tearing, but there was more of snarling and yelping. They were not of one mind as to the division of the spoil, he said to himself. God! If only the gray had kept it up for another mile. It was the sharp turns of the road that had done him.

Ah! a snuffling down the pass, the soft pad of feet, a flitting shadow on the snow, and a wolf stood in the entrance of the passage and gazed at him with surprise. Then it bristled and snarled till he saw the long, yellow fangs, then it tossed up its red muzzle and yelped, and in a moment a dozen more were leaping about the opening like grisly nightmares.

They were very gaunt and thin, he noticed. They licked their red muzzles hopefully as they leaped, and never for a second ceased their yelping and snarling. They were very hungry, — and here was more food. They made a rush into the passage and climbed on top of one another in their eagerness to get at it.

Stepan fired. The distance was too small for the heavy shot to scatter much, but two went down and the rest howled madly and came scrambling on. He put the gun behind him against the door and thrust at them with his spear, — at red, snarling mouths, and gnashing teeth, and gleaming eyes, and bristling, bloody fronts;



and the knife was sharp and strong and bit quick and deep.

They were very terrifying. The very sound and sight of them was enough to make any man quail, and Stepan's heart was going like a pump. They were like lost fiends out of hell, ravening to tear him to pieces. But all his heaven lay behind him and he did not flinch.

Half-a-dozen bodies blocked the narrow passage, the others scrambled on top of them and came tumbling over. The gun was suddenly thrust under his left arm from behind. He clinched it to his side and dropped his hand till it found the stock. Then he thrust his spear deep into an oncoming body and loosed it and fired into the crowd behind. They gave back time enough for him to drop the gun and grip the spear again, and then, growing bolder with his success, he drew his axe and hacked madly at every bristling head which showed above the dead barrier.

A wounded beast at his feet gnashed its evil mouth at him. With one blow he cleft its skull and shouted aloud at the feel of it. The rage of slaughter took hold of him. He no longer knew what fear might feel like, and weakness was not in him. These clean, sharp blows of the axe sent a new hot strength through all his veins. He laughed aloud and shore through snarling muzzles and bloody fronts, and laughed louder still, and still more loudly, as the snow walls became spattered with red, and the trampled floor was all red mud, and every-

thing was red wherever he looked, and the maimed brutes went off howling dismally, some less a paw, and some less a jaw, and some with gaping holes in their heads, but none whom the axe had bit with any stomach left for fighting.

Again the gun was thrust under his arm. Katia had picked it from under his feet and come out with it.

"They are dogs, Katia," he cried, with a wild laugh, "dogs to be whipped. Come on, come on, you curs!"

But the curs who still had whole skins, because they were the least valiant, or because they had had the fuller meal down below, lay panting outside. This was very different business from pulling down a frightened horse. The smell, indeed, was good; but, dead, you neither smell nor eat. Maybe there are still some overlooked scraps of horse left down there. And they began to sneak off. Stepan scrambled over the heap in the passage and emptied his gun into the last loping brute before it could get round the corner.

Then he waved his red axe at the placid moon with a laugh of triumph, and staggered back over the heap into the passage, and went into the house and shut the door.

He set the gun in a corner and dropped the red axe and spear on the floor, and sat down himself so heavily that the house shook. Little Katenka sat up at the sound and cried out, and little Stepan wailed in company.

"Be quiet, you two!" said Stepan, angrily. "You

are as bad as the beasts outside. Be — quiet, I tell you!” and he raised his hand as though to strike Katenka, a thing he had never done in his life.

Katia was very wise. She understood. She hushed little Stepan to her breast, and sat down on the floor by Katenka, and soothed her into silence with the other hand.

“I have killed wolves this night,” maundered Stepan, very loudly. The hot blood was racing in his head yet. He saw things dimly. “I have drunk blood. Wolves? — Dogs! — Curs! They thought to eat us up as they ate the gray horse. But they met their master. They are dead. I tell you they are dead, Katia. They lie there in heaps. Come and see them. Heaps, and I killed them,” and he made as though to get up.

“I saw you, Stepan. I saw them lie in heaps,” said Katia, quietly.

“They thought to beat me — me, Stepan Ivanovitch Iline. Me — Stepan Ivanovitch —” Then he rolled over on the floor and slept like a drunken man till the morning.

And when he woke he was no longer Stepan Ivanovitch Iline, the slayer of wolves, but the Stepan they knew and loved. But little Katenka looked timidly at him at first, and was still somewhat afraid of him, till he caught her up and kissed her as he was in the habit of doing, and tickled little Stepan till he screamed with delight.

When he had eaten, he went out and stood for a moment looking at the blood-bespattered passage in the snow, and a brief recollection came over him of his feelings of the previous night. Then he quietly dragged the dead wolves into the open, and shaved down the red sides of the passage on to the floor, so that all was clean and white again.

He counted his wolves out of curiosity. Many had been tentatively gnawed, but evidently found unpalatable. Then he went down the pass to look at the gray horse.

Nothing remained of it but its bones and hoofs and hair and the steel of its gear. The very saddle was ragged and worried. The stirrup leathers were chewed to strings. He picked up the remains of the saddle and carried it up to the house. It would come in useful for Katia.

Then he set to work, breaking a way for the horse out of its stable, and led it up, stiff and staggering, from its long confinement, and left it to find its legs.

And after they had fed, he tied the torn saddle on to the horse, and hung their small bundles from it, and they set off. Little Katenka he carried on his back till they should reach more level ground, for the horse was still somewhat doubtful as to its feet, and Katia carried Baby Stepan in her arms. So with his gun and spear under one arm, and his axe in his belt, and Katenka on his back, Stepan led the horse carefully by the head down the long slope toward Chernsk.

## CHAPTER XLVI

LITTLE Katenka hid her face in her father's neck at sight of the dead wolves, and Katia shivered and thanked God for their own safety as they passed the raw bones of the gray horse. But the snow was hard, and the sun shone brightly, and it was good to breathe the fresh air again even though it was keen as a knife.

They were weak from want of food, but the strong air braced both them and the horse, and presently they were able to rest the children on it, and to help themselves by laying hold of its gear, and so they came into Chernsk before the lights were out.

From his knowledge of Danof, Stepan deemed it well to go at once and report himself at police headquarters, and they arrived there escorted by a small crowd of villagers whom their passage had drawn out of the houses.

"What is this?" said Danof, at sight of them. "You have no right to be here."

"We could not help ourselves, Excellency."

"Why?"

"We have been snowed up in the hills for twenty-eight days," and the bystanders buzzed with surprise.

"Twenty-eight days! And your permit says ten —"

The letter of the law and a narrow mind are capable of infinite mischief and rarely fail to accomplish it.

"There are powers stronger even than his Excellency's, Excellency —" began Stepan.

"We do not admit it," said Danof, sourly.

"But we were snowed up and could not move."

"You had no right to allow yourself to be snowed up, and you should have moved."

"Last night," said Stepan, by way of diversion, "we were attacked by wolves. I killed sixteen of them. They are up there by our house."

"Da!" said a bystander. "Sixteen wolves! That is eighty roubles," for at that time they were paid five roubles for every wolf's head.

"Well, you cannot stop here," said Danof. "You must move on."

Stepan looked at him in amazement.

"To-night, Excellency?"

"At once. You have been here ten days already, and your papers say you must not stop more than ten days in any one place on any condition whatever."

"But I have moved on since I was here last, Excellency."

"If you stop to-night, you will have stopped here eleven days. Is it not so?"

"Not eleven days together, Excellency."

"Eleven days is eleven days."

"With respect, Excellency, none other has so interpreted the order."

"I have nothing to do with the others. If they like to put their heads in the noose, it is nothing to me. You must move on."

"My wife and the children I will leave at the inn, then. We have all been starving up there."

"We go with you, Stepan," said Katia, valiantly, but she looked very frail and white in the lamplight, and very weary with her long tramp, after the wasting of those twenty-eight days under the snow.

He was about to argue the matter with her and insist upon her stopping, when matters took another turn.

"That is Ivan Tsilka's saddle you have on your horse," said the old Cossack sergeant who had been looking at it carefully. "Ivan Tsilka of Drem. I know it by the mountings."

"How came you by that?" asked Captain Danof, scenting possible crime.

Stepan explained how he came by it.

"We must look into the matter," said Danof. "I must keep you here till we have done so."

"As you please, Excellency. It is all just as I have told you."

Then it suddenly struck his Excellency that if he kept him there he would himself be infringing Paschkin's ordinances, which was a serious thing to do, and the

thought of that set him scowling and inwardly cursing the cause of his annoyance.

However, after much thinking, he got over the difficulty by sending Stepan to be locked up in the next village, five miles away, and Katia determinedly went with him. Danof, however, permitted him, since there was no injunction against it, to arrange with one of the villagers to convey them there in his sledge. And another one got them some food while the sledge was getting ready, and refused the payment Stepan would have made him; and with this man he arranged for the care of his surviving horse, and also for the recovery of the house on wheels as soon as the snow permitted, in case he should not himself be able to attend to it.

And though he slept that night under bolt and bar, he slept in more content than for many a long night before it. For Katia and the children were safely lodged in a house close by and had plenty of money to pay their way; and as for himself, he had eaten enough almost to make up for past deficiencies, and his mind was at ease since he had done no wrong.

His jailer, for a consideration, permitted him to see Katia and the children each day, and allowed them to bring him food; and the quiet, restful time did them all good.

At the end of ten days, however, Danof, careful soul and literal interpreter of ordinances, sent a couple of



Cossacks to remove him to another village, and Katia and the children went with him. And again, when those ten days were up, he was removed in the same way to still a third place of detention. Such was the fear and the power of Paschkin throughout Siberia.

But at the end of thirty days Danof sent orders to release him, having received instructions to that effect from Tatukof, and having found nothing against him in respect of Ivan Tsilka of Drem, who was alive and well, though minus a gray horse. He also sent a formal reminder that, since he had been ten days in prison in that village, it was time he moved on at once, which injunction Stepan obeyed with cheerful alacrity.

They had money to live on and to spare. Spring was but a few weeks ahead, then they would set the house on its wheels again and once more enjoy the good times on the road. And when the next winter came, Stepan had made up his mind that Katia and the children should take no such risks again, but should stop in some town where he could visit them from time to time, and his mind would be at ease on their account.

Katia had brought him word that the decent men of Chernsk had succeeded in bringing the caravan into the town and were holding it there for him, and he set off at once to take possession.

## CHAPTER XLVII

BUT the hard times in the snow, and her anxiety on Stepan's account, had told heavily on Katia herself, and the very day they reached Chernsk she fell sick, and before night was in a high fever. The sickness had been working in her for many days, but her valiant heart had kept down all outward appearance of it, and now she had to pay. When at last she did break down, the collapse was complete and terrifying.

It was when they were driving in a hired telega to Chernsk, and were within sight of the town, that she gripped Stepan's arm with a suddenness that startled him nearly off his seat on the side of the bumping wagon.

"The wolves!" she said in a hoarse whisper. "Don't you hear them, Stepan? They are coming. Yes, they are coming, Stepan. They will catch us, and tear us as they did the gray horse."

He looked down at her in amazement, and saw the white cheeks burning and the blue eyes blazing.

"There are no wolves, dushenka," he said soothingly but in great fear of heart, for he had never seen her this way before.

"I hear them. They are coming. They will catch

us, Stepan," and she sank back on to the bundles in the bottom of the telega, and threw an arm round Katenka, who began to cry with fear, and clasped little Stepan tight to her breast.

"If they come, I will kill them as I did before," he said, by way of humouring her, and drove on the faster.

She would lie still for a minute, and then start up with terrified eyes and wild fear in her face, crying: "Faster, Stepan! Faster! They are coming! They are coming!" till little Katenka shrieked with terror, and the tiny Stepan, sharing the general discomfort, added his tiny pipe. And Stepan, with a greater fear at his heart than the wolves had ever roused there, flogged the straining horse to still greater speed, for this was beyond his understanding, and all he knew was that he must get help.

So they rattled through the long street of Chernsk, and the townspeople all turned out to wonder at them.

He drove to the inn, and carried Katia and little Stepan inside, leaving little Katenka wailing in the telega.

"She is ill," he said hurriedly to the woman of the inn. "Send for a doctor while I get her to bed."

And the doctor, when he came and examined her, shook his head gravely, and said:—

"She has the fever and she has had it many days.

Why has she not been nursed?" and he looked sombrely at Stepan.

"I am only released from prison to-day," said Stepan, "and I knew nothing of it."

"Ah!" said the doctor, who knew his story. "Well, I will do what I can, but unless you watch her night and day, you will lose her."

"Lose her! Lose her! Oh, my God!" began Stepan, at so dire a prospect.

Then the woman of the inn came in to tell him he was wanted outside. And outside was a stolid Cossack, with a message from the chief that he could not be allowed to stop in the town that night and must move on at once.

"See, Iline!" said Danof, when Stepan had panted out his story, in words that tumbled hotly over one another, and with eyes that swam blindly at thought of Katia's extremity. "It was not I indorsed your papers, but on me rests the responsibility if I depart from the instructions. You must go."

"I have been away thirty days," panted Stepan, grasping wildly at any chance.

"You have stopped here ten days already. Your papers do not permit you to stay longer than ten days in any one place upon any conditions whatever. It is no use talking. You must go."

"Before God, Excellency —" began Stepan, feeling somewhat as he did when he chopped at the wolves.

But Danof waved him down peremptorily and closed the interview. He was not by nature an exceptionally cruel man; arbitrary and hard, indeed, and bound to the final letter of the law, but he was getting tired of the trouble this man caused him. And when it came to a question of possible ill results to himself or to another, the matter needed no consideration.

"If you are not out of Chernsk inside an hour, you will leave under escort for Irkutsk," said Danof, angrily.

And Stepan smote down both him and Paschkin with the blow of an imaginary axe, and turned and left the room.

Within the hour he had made such arrangements for Katia's welfare as were possible at alien hands; had seen the doctor and bitterly explained the matter to him, and enlisted his sympathy and best care; had settled up his affairs with the townfolk; had bought another horse; and was bumping slowly over the thin snow to a village ten miles away. There even Paschkin could not hinder his staying for ten days, and there he could get news of Katia each day in one way or another.

He took the children with him. Fortunately, Katia, feeling her own strength on the wane, had weaned little Stepan and he felt the separation least of all. Katenka sobbed ceaselessly for her mother; and her father, with his own heart rent and broken, comforted her as best he could and with infinite tenderness.

## CHAPTER XLVIII

Now indeed the decree of Paschkin bit deep, and the venom of it might well have poisoned the soul of a better man. But it struck too deep for curses. Words were futile and cursing was waste of breath.

He could think only of Katia tossing on her bed among strangers, chased for ever by the howling pack, and calling ceaselessly for his help, as he had heard her when he went in to kiss her forehead and she instantly lay still. Ah, God! Would they watch her and tend her as he would have done? Could they soothe her with gentle words as he would have done? Could they — No! They could do nothing, and Katia would die. And his heart curdled within him at the prospect.

Before it was light he left Katenka and the little Stepan in charge of a woman of the village, and took one of his horses, and rode back to Chernsk.

He found Katia still fleeing before the wolves, and she clung to him desperately. She did not seem to know him, but in some mysterious way his voice soothed her.

The doctor, when he came in, assured him that she had lacked nothing. But he did not look hopeful. Her

strength had been sapped. The fever was raging high. He knew that before long it would wear her out, that the fires would die for want of fuel, and nothing but ashes would be left.

It was midday before Captain Danof heard that he was there.

Then he sent for him, but the interview was a short one.

"Iline, I cannot permit it," began Danof.

Stepan said nothing, but there was that look out of his eyes which sent a chill down Danof's back, as though the finger of Death had touched him, and the remembrance of it remained with him.

He saw Stepan's eyes, and that dreadful thing that lay behind them on the blank wall long after Stepan himself had turned and gone without speaking a word. He saw them on the stark blackness of the night when he lay in bed. And the recollection of where and when he had once before seen eyes like them came back to him and made him thoughtful.

The stockaded yard of a prison; a man undergoing the knout, the flesh of his back hanging in strips; that same dreadful look in his eyes; the man cast off and sunk in a heap, a raw, ragged remnant of humanity; the Governor passing it unmoved with his young aide, Danof; the sudden, horrible uncoiling of the ragged heap; the leap at the Governor's throat; the wild beast rending and tearing; the hacking of it off with swords,

but not until its dreadful work was done, and the Governor would knout no more men to ribbons.

And the same dreadful thing that looked out of those eyes in that stockaded yard had looked out of Stepan Iline's eyes at him that day.

Captain Danof cursed Stepan Iline and he cursed Paschkin. He was still cursing promiscuously, and still undecided what to do in the matter, when he fell asleep. His ideas tended vaguely toward guns and special instructions to his Cossack guard.

Each time he woke those eyes glared at him out of the darkness. Perhaps, after all, it might be better to waive a point in the matter. It was terribly hard on the man, there was no doubt about that. Paschkin was undoubtedly possessed of the Devil, as all men said. If the effects of his abuses fell only on himself, well and good. But — well, he would see in the morning. And he tried hard to shut out those eyes and all that lay behind them, but could not, no matter how tightly he closed his own.

It was no platoon of Cossacks with instructions to shoot him down, however, which met Stepan outside the town, as he came galloping through the mist-wreaths in the early morning, but only the old sergeant, alone and unarmed, while Stepan presented a wild enough figure on his rough barebacked horse. He had his long gun at his back, his axe in his belt, his home-made spear in his hand, and if looks went for anything he was quite prepared to use them.



He came anticipating resistance. His face was lean and hungry, his eyes burnt in their hollows, his hairs bristled wildly. He looked more beast of prey than man. The old sergeant thought he looked like a bow bent to its fullest just before the arrow leaves the string.

The sergeant threw up his hand and stopped him. Stepan jerked round his gun and prepared for combat.

"Don't shoot me, Stepan Ivanovitch," said the sergeant, quietly. "I have come to speak, not to fight with you," and Stepan, seeing that he had no weapon, lowered his own. "And I come on my own account, not from the chief."

"Speak quickly, then. My wife waits."

"It was to warn you I came. You risk everything by coming thus. You must know that the chief has no choice in the matter. What can be done for your wife is being done. You can do no more —"

"And you — if your wife lay there, what would you do?" — jerked Stepan, with sparks in his smouldering eyes.

"I? Before God, I would do as you are doing, Stepan Ivanovitch. All the same, it is not wisdom."

"With my own hands, up there in the hills, I slew sixteen wolves," said Stepan, not vauntingly, but as an argument of weight. "If needs be, I will slay sixteen men if they stand between me and my wife. Carry that word to the chief. Now I go," and he kicked his

heels into the shaggy sides of his horse and galloped away through the mist.

His eyes shot wary glances all round as he came into the town. But they fell on nothing suspicious, and he went straight to the inn.

He was stepping down the passage as quietly as his armament would permit, when the door of his wife's room opened and the doctor came out. He started at the bristling aspect of the man, then quietly beckoned him in, and they stood by the bed on which Katia lay at rest.

"She died at the dawn," said the doctor. "I was with her all night. She has wanted for nothing, but it was too late."

Iline spoke no word, but gazed like a ravenous beast on the sweet, dead face. Then, before the doctor saw what he was at, he stooped and gathered her up, blankets and all, and bore her from the room. He scrambled on to his horse somehow, dug his heels into its sides, and galloped off the way he had come, with that which had been his life clasped tightly in front of him.

The old sergeant saw him coming and understood. He gravely saluted the burden Iline bore,—the visible burden, and perhaps the invisible,—and stood and looked after him till he disappeared in the mist.

Then he shook his head and said, "Paschkin is the Devil," and as he went into the town, he said, "If Iline and Paschkin ever meet—" and then he nodded

his head, and then he shook it, and possibly he thought what he would have done himself under such circumstances. For a man may be a sergeant of Cossacks and yet retain the feelings of a man, though it is somewhat unusual, I grant you.

## CHAPTER XLIX

STEPAN buried Katia in a lonely place among the hills; where, none but he knew.

Then he went quietly back to the village where he had left the children, busied himself getting the house on to its wheels again, and two days later set out gloomily for the south.

But how different now the travelling — for him at all events! For his heart and the best of his life were in that lonely grave among the hills by Chernsk. He went because he had to go, to keep moving on. Paschkin had said it. Paschkin — ah — yes! — Paschkin! And whenever he thought of Paschkin, his face grew hard and grim, and his eyes smouldered like the ashes of a fire that only needed fuel to make it blaze.

The bells — the deep-toned crimson in the middle and the silvery chimers at the sides — sang as merrily as ever; but the music had gone out of his life with Katia, and that in him which had responded to their singing lay under the piled stones on the hillside by Chernsk. But for the children and their delight in them, he would have put the bells away and gone in silence, as his sore heart did.

The snow still covered the hills and lay in patches

here and there, in exposed places, even by the roadside. The roads were full of mud, and he sat on the seat where Katia used to sit, and little Katenka sat beside him, chattering all the time like a merry magpie, full of life and the spring, and calling the little father's attention to this thing and that, as her sharp eyes sought and found their intimate concerns even in muddy roads and snow-streaked hillsides. And Baby Stepan swung safely in a great pocket in the doorway between them, and clapped his hands and gurgled at Katenka and the horses and the bells, and at things about him that were hidden from all but himself. These two found the world still bright, and they lacked nothing, in material matters at all events.

But at times little Katenka would wring her father's heart, and scrape his raw wounds, with her innocent questionings.

"Will the little mother come back to us to-day, little father?" she would ask.

"Not to-day, little Katenka," he would answer gloomily, with a twisting mouth.

"Why then? I want her. Where has she gone?"

"She has gone on in front, little Katenka."

"She never did that before, little father. Why has she gone on in front now?"

"She had to go, dushenka. She could not help it."

"Was it the evil Paschkin made her go, little father?"

for to Katenka Paschkin represented all power and all evil.

"Yes, it was Paschkin made her go," he would say through his set teeth, and then the smouldering fire in his heart would spurt into a blaze.

"He is a bad, bad man, is Paschkin," said little Katenka. "Why don't you kill him, little father, as you killed the wolves up there in the snow?"

"Ah!" and little Katenka heard his teeth gritting inside, and for a moment his face was as it had been when he came in from killing wolves and spoke roughly to her. But he had never spoken to her so except that one time, and she was not frightened of him now.

And more than once she asked: "The little mother has got a long, long way in front of us. Shall we catch her to-day, little father? Shall we catch her to-day?"

"Not to-day, little Katenka."

"She has gone fast, fast. But we shall come up with her sometime, little father?"

"Please God, little Katenka!" and the child lived in hope.

He remembered long afterward how Katenka found her first spring flowers.

They were jogging along through the white spring sunshine, and Katenka was prattling away as usual, when suddenly she jumped to her feet and began dancing excitedly.

"Stop, little father, stop!" she cried, and he drew rein on the instant.

"Lift me down, little father, lift me down! I must get them. Oh, the darlings! I must get them!"

"What is it then, dushenka?" he asked, as he swung her down.

"There!" she cried breathlessly, and sped away back, and up toward a swath of snow, and fell on her knees beside it, kissing in wild delight a patch of little blue flowers which her sharp eyes had spied against their background of the snow.

"Oh, the darlings!" and the rosy face was buried among them again. "They are like the little mother's eyes, little father," — and truly they were a wonderful and beautiful deep blue, — "she has passed this way, and she told them to look for us. And, oh, if we had missed them! But they laughed up at me, and I saw them, and they made me think of the little mother. Oh, if we had passed, what would she have said? She would have said, 'Did you see my blue-eyed flowers?' And if we had said 'No,' she would have been sad."

So they gathered the blue-eyed flowers, and little Katenka talked of them all that day, and went to sleep that night with them clasped so tightly in her hand that all the life that was left in them was gone long before the morning. But, because she had been thinking and talking so much of her mother all through the day, she

dreamed of her all night. And when she had cried over her flowers in the morning, she told her father very minutely and circumstantially all that had passed between them. And that day they found quantities of blue flowers and she was happy again.

Each day after that brought them more and more beautiful unfoldings of the spring, and little Katenka was busy from morning till night, flitting to and fro among them with shrieks of delight, and never so happy as when her arms were filled to overflowing.

And yet at times the child grew sober and thoughtful in the lack of that which had been and was not, for nothing can quite fill the place of a mother's care and love.

Her father was gentleness itself and did his best, but there was a something of softness and tenderness gone out of her life, and just now and again she missed it, and grew sober over it.

In the little intricacies of their toilets he had at first blundered sorely. But Katenka greeted all his shortcomings with such peals of merry laughter, and enjoyed herself so amazingly in setting him right, and showing him how to do things properly, that he proved himself but a dull scholar, and prolonged his apprenticeship on purpose to keep his teacher entertained. But with it all he took good care that in nothing should they go awanting — in nothing save that one thing of which Paschkin had robbed them all.



Of an evening, by the fire, when they had fed, and Baby Stepan had, between them, been undressed and washed and got off to sleep, she would climb up into her father's arms, where he sat seeing things in the dancing flames, and seek his caresses. They were soft and tender always, and full of a gentle pity which was beyond her understanding; but they lacked something of the gladness she vaguely remembered and as vaguely missed.

And inside the house, in the loneliness of the night, she would creep across to him and nestle into his arms, and he would kiss her softly and sadly. For, dear as she was to him, she could not at all fill the place of the little mother who was gone, nor could he quite to her.

## CHAPTER I

THE early days of their travelling brought a new inmate to the house on wheels, — a little comrade in whom Katenka rejoiced exceedingly, and Baby Stepan also, but in lesser degree in accord with his understanding.

Iline was striding along by his horses up a steep hill-road, with his head down in gloomy thought. Katenka was flitting about the hillside after flowers, chattering away to them and to herself as usual. Baby Stepan swung in his pocket in the doorway and clapped his hands at all and everything.

Suddenly, a shriek from Katenka, arrested in her flight from one side of the road to the other: "Oh, stop, little father, stop! See the dear little white brother of the woods!"

And Stepan stopped his horses just as they were about to walk over a very small white owl, which sat in the middle of the road looking solemnly at the approaching team, but making no effort to escape.

It was bruised and dusty and dazed. What family catastrophe had befallen it they could not tell, but it was evidently unhappy, and quite unable to take proper care of itself.

"Is it alive, little father? Is it alive?" cried the breathless Katenka, as he picked the soft white bundle up. "Yes, it is alive, for it moved its eyes. Oh, what great big eyes the little brother has!"

"It is hurt, I think, little Katenka, and if you had not seen it, we should have walked right over it."

"Oh, the poor little brother! Shall we keep it till it is well, little father? I am sure it cannot take care of itself. Shall we keep it, little father?"

"Yes, we will keep it, little Katenka. We will keep it till it can fly again, and then it shall fly away."

"Put me up on the seat, little father, and give the little brother to me, and I will nurse it," and all that day she sat nursing the little brother and crooning softly to it to soothe its fears. And when it bit her finger once it was only a very small bite, and she only laughed merrily and cried down to her father, "Little father, the little white brother has bitten my finger and I think he must be hungry."

So her father gave her a piece of raw meat, and bade her tear it in small pieces and feed the little brother with it. And she had many questions to ask as to why he liked his meat raw, and if he would not like it better cooked if he once tried it; and while she chattered, the little brother proved that raw meat was quite to his taste, and, whatever his injuries, he had not lost his appetite.

He showed no disposition to go away. Such appre-

ciation and attention, such a supply of delicious food without any necessity of seeking it, such comfortable lodgings, and such pleasant companionship did not fall to the lot of little owls every day in the week, and this one showed the wisdom of his kind by accepting the position with philosophic content.

So preternaturally wise did he look at all times, indeed, that little Katenka's merry laugh pealed out whenever she looked at him, and even Stepan's grave face relaxed, now and again, when he caught the great solemn eyes of the little brother turned upon him as if he knew all his thoughts and could read him through and through.

Katenka would sit by the hour on the front seat, nursing the new little comrade and pointing out to him all the odd things which caught her eye as they jogged along. And if the little white brother said nothing, he was at all events an excellent listener and seemed to ponder it all very thoughtfully.

At night he perched on a cross beam in a corner near the ikon, and when the country folk climbed up to peep inside, and their eyes wandered from the holy images to the solemn little white bundle alongside, they stared hard, and then dropped back, saying: "Da! but you have some strange things up there, Stepan Ivanovitch. One would almost think that little white owl was alive."

When he quite got over the effects of his accident, he took an occasional flight abroad, and the first time he

went Katenka thought he had gone for good and was sorely troubled.

They had made their camp and lighted their fire. The black pot was boiling, and Katenka was mothering Baby Stepan as he sprawled on his back and kicked and squealed, when suddenly the little white brother, who had been sitting in a bunch blinking at the flames, flapped his wings and sailed silently off into the forest.

"Little father! Little father!" shrieked Katenka in dismay, "the little brother is gone. He has flown away above the trees. Oh, little father, whatever shall we do?" and she wept passionately at the little brother's desertion.

Her father comforted her as well as he could.

"You would not keep the little brother against his will, little Katenka," he said gently.

"No, no, but I loved him, little father, and he loved me, and I wanted him. Oh, why should he go away?"

"Perhaps he has gone to seek his own brothers and sisters, little Katenka. Perhaps he heard them calling in the woods."

"I loved him more than them all," sobbed Katenka, and refused to be comforted.

But when in the night she lay awake with her grief, feeling the house empty for lack of the little white brother, of a sudden she heard a flutter at the door, then a well-known scabble of little claws, and the little brother was climbing up to his usual perch.

She jumped up with a shout of joy that woke Baby Stepan.

"Little father, little father!" she cried to the sombre man sitting by the dying fire below, "the little white brother has come home again. He is here on his perch above my head."

"I am glad, little Katenka," said her father, and little Katenka hardly slept at all that night for joy of the little brother's return.

After that he often took a flight in the twilight, but he always came back, and Katenka had no longer any fear of his going for good.

Baby Stepan was too young to feel what he had lost. So long as his little round stomach was kept just properly filled, and he could sleep when he wanted, and wake to the tinkling of the bells and the jogging brown backs of the horses and the shining of the sun and Katenka's caresses, he was quite happy.

But for the gloomy-faced man who sat of a night looking into the ashes — the ashes of the wood fire and the ashes of his life — when the children were safely abed, there was little happiness left. He was grateful for the children, and much — but not all — of his thought was for them. But — they were not Katia.

When he was tramping along by the horses' heads up the long mountain slopes, among the greening firs and pines and evergreens, he would catch himself

turning at times to the open doorway, half expectant of the dear face there. And then he would turn with a sigh and plod hopelessly on. And at such times little Katenka's merry chatter and Baby Stepan's babblings gave him no pleasure, but were like the turning of the knife in his wound.

And the rest of his thought when he sat gazing into the ashes — Paschkin — always Paschkin. And when his thoughts ran on Paschkin, they were deep thoughts and dark.

He met Peter Krop among the Altais, and the two men sat long that night over the ashes and spoke little. For Peter Krop had gone through the deep waters in his time and he knew the inadequacy of words.

It was when they were separating, each to go his own way again, that he said meaningly to Stepan: "Remember, Stepan Ivanovitch, that the children are left to you. And children are a gift from God."

"I have not forgotten it, Peter Petrovitch," said Stepan, and went on his way.

## CHAPTER LI

WITHOUT doubt the children were Stepan's salvation at this time. For the time being they stood between him and — much. And perhaps he dimly recognised the fact and repaid them as he could.

Their childish ailments he combated as they occurred, with the willing advice and assistance of other children's mothers along the way. Their tiny wardrobes he replenished in the same manner. If they had lost one mother, they had found a hundred foster-mothers, who were always on the lookout for their passing, and ran out to greet them as soon as the bells rang out in the distance and the house on wheels hove in sight.

So far Stepan had had no serious difficulties in connection with them. Life flowed along quietly and placidly, and the yawning gaps and fissures below were unseen. Many a good-looking girl in the villages he visited would have jumped at the chance of sharing his house and his fortunes, — Paschkin and all, — but Stepan never gave them a thought. His heart was with Katia in the hills beyond Chernsk.

That spring and summer would have been to him as great a joy as the last if only she had been there.



But without her it was all as nothing. It was living, but it was not life.

He did not so express himself even to himself. But he felt it, which was very much more, and felt it the deeper, perhaps, because his thoughts were dumb, and his heart was very sore and desolate.

He looked forward to the winter with doubt and foreboding. How carry the children with him through the snows? And yet, how leave them behind? To take them would be a great risk. To leave them would be a great anxiety. He would be fearing ill to them every moment they were away, no matter how careful the hands in which he left them. He pondered it to and fro as he tramped, and was still undecided in his mind, when, as autumn drew on, a great longing took him to visit Katia again, up there among the hills by Chernsk.

The steppe was carpeted with the dull gold of the dried-up flowers till they struck the edge of the swamp, which ran from the foothills nearly as far as Chernsk itself. He would not go near the town, but kept along by the hills, and busy little Katenka, who had been mourning the loss of her flowers, woke to joy again, and flitted along the edge of the dark water like a humming-bird, and ran back and forth with her loads all day long, till the house on wheels became a travelling garden once more.

They were still working round the low-lying bottoms,

with the bright green islands and the flaming patches of colour that charmed Katenka's soul, when the heavy autumn rains came on, and scored the hillsides with deep channels, and made the rough roads impassable, and set the dark waters of the swamp churning and boiling. And there they had to wait till the flood-gates above should be closed and the skies should brighten again.

It was here one night, while the rain was still beating viciously on the roof and pouring in monotonous little cascades from the eaves, that little Katenka suddenly lost all her brightness and the joy of life, and lay heavy-eyed and flushed and listless, and the little white brother from his perch looked down on her with solemn wonder.

Stepan treated her as he had done under the advice of the many foster-mothers for apparently similar ailments, and hoped the morning would find her better.

But in the middle of the night she startled him from a half sleep with a strange, gasping croak, the like of which he had never heard before, and it seemed to him that she was choking.

As fast as his slow materials and shaking hands would let him, he lit the lamp and found the child sitting up, with pale lips and starting eyes, clawing for breath with spasmodic clutchings of the pitiful little hands.

He took her up in his arms, with an instinct of protection from the evil he could not comprehend. The

little body straightened now and again with a violent jerk and that dreadful croak, which smote his heart like a hammer each time it came; yet, frightsome as it was, each time it was longer of coming he feared lest it should not come again.

He tried to get water down her throat, but she beat it blindly out of his hands. The dreadful appeal of the straining blue eyes unnerved him. He would have cut off his right hand to give her breath, but this that had got hold of her was beyond him, and he could do nothing but stand and watch the unequal fight as it dragged slowly to its end.

He clenched his useless hands till the nails ran into the palms. He ground his teeth in agony. His lips retracted, his face crumpled up. He held his breath and his tortured heart in suspense, while each hard round was fought out, and only breathed again when the little sufferer had a moment's respite. The horses outside, under their soaked canvas shelters, stamped uneasily as though aware of the Presence. The rain beat heavily on the roof and poured from the eaves in a monotonous babble of melancholy little voices. Baby Stepan woke up and joined his lusty little pipe to the unaccustomed noise, and the little white brother looked solemnly down upon it all from his corner by the holy images.

How long that grim struggle against overpowering odds lasted, Stepan did not know. Each slow moment

was a long-drawn agony to him, for life and death were in each one.

But suddenly the rain, which had never ceased for a moment for three days, beat a last wild tattoo on the roof, and there fell a great silence. Little Stepan rolled over and went to sleep. The horses stopped their restless trappings as though surprised at the sudden quiet, and stood listening, and the little white owl swelled himself to double his usual size and gazed at his little sister with wide, unwinking eyes.

Little Katenka croaked no more, but lay white and spent. And Stepan, falling on his knees, felt the little cheek cold and damp. He kissed her and spoke to her, but she lay quite still. With the great fear at his heart, he clasped her hands in his. They were very cold. He bent his forehead to her lips. But no breath came.

Then with a broken sigh he lay down on his face on the floor and stretched himself in his agony, for he and little Stepan and the little white brother were alone.

It was a silent and grim-faced man who carried burdens up into the hills next day. He was heavily weighted, but the heaviest part of his load was not that which showed most; not the spade which was slung at his back, nor the jumping child in its pocket above it, nor the axe in his belt, nor the quiet little figure rolled in a blanket which he held tight to his sick heart for the last time.

He climbed gloomily in and out of the new water-courses, and pushed steadily on over the soft ground and the hard, and troubled about neither. He was taking Katenka to her mother, he and little Stepan.

He buried her there by the side of Katia, and buried her deep, and piled great stones above her to keep off the wolves, while little Stepan gurgled cheerfully on a heap of newly-turned earth hard by.

Then he knelt and prayed strange prayers by the two piles of stones, and then he picked up little Stepan, and gave him food to comfort his insatiable little stomach, and then he went back the way he had come.

The loss of Katenka decided him to leave little Stepan in safer keeping than his own for the winter. He thought over all the women in the villages through which he was in the habit of travelling, and finally settled on one, Elizabeth Volskaia, who lived in Zarm. He knew her to be a kind-hearted, motherly soul, and he remembered that she had not long since lost a child of her own, and he thought she would be good to the motherless one for sake of the one she had lost.

He journeyed straight to that village, made arrangements with her, and his last sight of his boy, when he drove away, was of him jumping in Elizabeth Volskaia's arms, and clapping and crowing at sight of a

drove of little pigs which were squeaking and scrambling about their prostrate mother in the roadway.

The little white brother he took with him, because little Katenka had loved him, and now he was a very lonely man.

## CHAPTER LII

THAT was the gloomiest winter he had ever passed, gloomier by far than the one when he was in Yeniseisk and Katia was in Irkutsk. For then if his heart had its fears, it also had its greater hopes. And now —

The house on wheels was a perpetual reminder of the happy times which could never be again. His thoughts filled it with memories of Katia and little Katenka. How very happy they had been! Katia sitting there in the open doorway; little Katenka running up, breathless and excited, with her arms full of flowers. And now —

Always until now he had had something left to hope for.

Now — There was his little Stepan, it is true, and there was — ah, yes! — there was still one other thing left to hope for, if ever the chance offered.

It was not very clear in his mind yet, that other thing that had to be done. It came and it went. Sometimes his thoughts ran along healthier lines, and that other idea of his grew vague and indefinite, and lay in his mind rather as a possibility than a purpose. Sometimes the purpose gathered strength and rode him hard, and he was tempted to go at once and attempt its

accomplishment. But common sense as a rule prevailed, and he jogged soberly on his way, the quietest, and gloomiest, and — since his requirements were small and he did not insist on large profits — the most welcome of traders.

But those winter nights when, save for the little white brother, he lay all alone in his wooden house, with the horses stamping outside, and the cold north wind piling the snow into mighty drifts all round them, were very long and very trying and did not make for good. Ah! strange things were done in that little wooden house in those lonely night watches, even though he never raised a finger or moved a limb, and the little white brother, on his perch by the holy images, watched it all with sad and wondering eyes.

He met Peter Krop more than once, and the two men would sit by the hour with few words between them but much sorrow. For the shrewd old Jew had not lived sixty-six years — mostly sad ones — for nothing, and he guessed what that was that lay deep down in Stepan's heart. But Stepan never spoke of it, and he would not speak of it himself, lest he should be sorely misjudging his friend and perhaps turning his feet to the very path he feared for them.

“Time heals all wounds, Stepan Ivanovitch,” he said gravely, when they were parting one time. “And you still have your little Stepan left. A man-child is a great gift and a great possession.”



In the spring Stepan turned his horses' heads toward Zarm, and wondered if his boy would know him again.

But Elizabeth Volshaïa met him with bowed head and streaming eyes and broken voice.

Little Stepan had died two months before of convulsions brought on by teething.

Stepan listened quietly to her story, gave her money for her care of the boy and her sorrow at his loss, and went on his way more gloomily than ever. And the dark thoughts that had lurked so long in the shadowy corners of his mind waxed stronger and darker than ever.

Since Katia went the children had stood between him and much — and now the children were gone, and he stood face to face with that dreadful thing that filled all the place they had left.

To outward appearance he was much as he had been since Katia died. Somewhat gloomier and harder of face, maybe, but always quiet and thoughtful, and unexact in his dealings.

And now, too, he went silently along the roads and over the steppes. The bells upon the arch of his shaft horse mocked him with their merry chiming. They sang no more after the day he heard of little Stepan's death. And since they had been dear to Katenka, he journeyed up into the hills beyond Chernsk and buried them there in her grave, — the deep-toned crimson in the middle and the silvery tinklers at the sides, just as they

used to swing in the arch, — and he liked to think of them lying there, by the side of her who had loved them so well.

And now, when he sat by his lonely fire of a night, and gazed into the ashes, he laughed grimly to himself at times, as though his thoughts pleased him. And the little white brother, on his perch by the holy images, ruffled himself distressfully as though there was something about that did not please him.

One night a wanderer begged permission to sit by the fire with him, and Stepan gave him food and told him to sit as long as he would. Then he sat down himself and leaned forward and looked into the fire, and forgot all about his visitor. And now and again he laughed a laugh that sent cold chills running down the other's back, though the front of him was roasting because he did not dare to move. But at last the newcomer could stand it no longer and he crept quietly away, with backward glances at the man before the fire, to make sure that he was not following him. He slept under a tree that night, as he was in the habit of doing, and thanked whatever gods he served when he woke in the morning and found himself still alive.

But the village folk, with whom Stepan's dealings were, saw only that his face grew ever more sombre, and that he spoke less, and was less and less exacting in his bargains. His requirements were very small, his desire to amass smaller still. There was only one

thing he wanted, only one final satisfaction life could yield him, and for that he could wait till the time came.

Had he been free to wander in Irkutsk, as he was free to wander elsewhere, he would have been able to see his way much more clearly. As it was, he could only travel to and fro along the marches, biding his time, and with but one fear — lest his victim should die other death than the one he allotted him over the fire of a night.

Whenever he met trader or traveller from Irkutsk city, he questioned him quietly, with no show of undue interest, and kept himself fairly informed as to what went on there.

Peter Krop, when they met, read him like a book, and saw clearly whither he was tending, but was powerless to alter his route. He did his best. He offered to join forces with him and journey in company; alleged, even pleaded, old age as good reason for such a combination; and urged the obvious advantages to the younger partner. For old Peter had made much money and was still always making, and he had not a friend in the world except Stepan.

But Stepan would not hear of it. He had more money than he required, and he also was always making more than enough to live on. And the only certain thing about the future was that he must live it alone. For somewhere in it was a wild, flaming glory, a mad satisfying fury, a roaring, rushing outbreak of blasting red

and yellow fires such as he saw in his mind in the ashes of a night. And when it came, all that he had suffered, and all that he had held in check so long, would burst the barriers and leap at the throat of the cause of it all, and he would once more hew and thrust and smash, and feel the lust of death as he had felt it when he slaughtered the bloody fangs in the hills.

And him he would reserve till the last, — Paschkin, the knouter of women; Paschkin, the breaker of lives; Paschkin who feared no man; Paschkin the almighty. He would beat him to his knees, and shout with laughter at sight of the terror in his face — Paschkin before whom all men quailed.

And then he would deal him one blow for little Stepan, and one for Katenka, and one final blow for Katia. Oh, the mad joy of it! The keen, fierce thrill of it, — through legs and loins and arms, right up into his brain, till his head felt like to burst into a thousand pieces, — as the thirsty steel bit deep, through shrinking flesh and crunching bone, right down to the life, and Paschkin would trouble the world no more.

And as for himself, what matter? He would die a thousand deaths under the knout, and laugh to scorn the dangling ribbons of his flesh, so long as he had lived that mighty minute when Paschkin lay bare to his axe.

But no man must suffer with him, or for him, or through him. His alone had been the bitterness of the tyrant's caprice; his alone should be the vengeance,

his alone the penalty. And so he would not hearken to Peter Krop's offers, and Peter went on his lonely way, expectant always of calamity.

And the little white brother was very mournful in these days and hardly ever left his perch. Stepan fed him and soothed him as little Katenka used to do, because she had loved him. But, at times, he found the little bird's great eyes fixed upon him with so knowing a look that he felt as if the little brother knew all that was in him, and he was glad the little brother could not speak.

## CHAPTER LIII

THE months dragged on, and another winter passed, and to all outward observation no quieter traveller crossed the steppes than Stepan Iline in his sun-blistered, weather-beaten house on wheels.

Not a woman in all the villages but was glad to see him, though his face was gloomy beyond the ordinary run of men, and he had few words and no tattle.

Not a child was afraid of him or ever had a rough word from him. Indeed, he had little notice for them, even when they clustered overcuriously round his house and got in his way; not more than a tightening of the lips and a stiffening of the face.

But inside the house on wheels was a long gun kept always bright and clean and well oiled, and always loaded and ready; and a spear that had drunk blood, and gleamed viciously in the lamplight as though thirsting for more; and an axe with an edge like a knife. And sometimes, of a winter's night, he would heft the axe, as he touched up the edge with his stone, and thrill with the feel of it as it swung in his strong brown hand. And when he did that, the little white brother, up on his perch by the holy images, always gave a jump, and a flutter, and thereafter watched him gloomily.

The gun was good, and the spear was good, but the axe was the weapon Stepan loved. Its bite was so much closer and more intimate. You could feel the death in it as it shored through the life that had to go, feel it close, in your very hand as it were, a very part of your very self. Yes, it should be with the axe that he would deal the blows that paid for little Stepan and for Katenka and for Katia. And then he would pass his stone lovingly along the hungry, curving beak of it, though it was already as true and keen as cunning hand and bitter heart could make it. For the life that had to go before it was Paschkin's. And the lives that it had to take toll for were Baby Stepan's, and little Katenka's, and Katia's.

Time ran on. The summer suns blistered the paint on the house on wheels till it chipped and fell off. The autumn rains and winter winds and snows beat upon it, the dust and the mud clung to it, till at last it became all one colour and that a dingy gray, the colour of the muddy roads.

"But why don't you paint your house again, Stepan Ivanovitch?" they asked him at times; and all that he answered was, "Why should I paint it?"

For at any time that might happen which would end his wanderings, and another's, and he lived only in the hope of it.

Summers and winters passed, and still he wandered quietly in and out among them, — waiting, waiting,

waiting, for the fulfilment of his heart's only desire, his only companion the little white owl.

His mind, intent only upon that one hope, and brooding over it night and day, became somewhat closed to outward things. He moved and spoke and acted in a way that showed his thoughts were busy with other matters. But the little white brother never suffered any neglect, for little Katenka had loved him.

The village folk said that he was aging quickly since his wife died. Some said that his mind was failing. At all times now he was very deliberate in his movements. What need for haste in a man who was only waiting for one thing, the coming of which he could not hasten?

And he was very silent. He said just what had to be said and no more. Of a night, by the inn stove, while others talked and laughed, and drank more than was good for them, he would sit, neither speaking nor listening, seeing things that were very far off, in a way that was somewhat disconcerting to strangers, though those who knew him and his story were not troubled at it.

In any one who came from Irkutsk city, or could give him news of it, he was more interested. He would occasionally even question them as to what they knew of Paschkin and his doings. But quietly always, and not in such a way as to excite any suspicion of undue interest on his part.



He traded still, but more because it was expected of him than from the desire of gain. The women in all the villages he touched would have felt a gap in their lives, and a considerable difference in their minute treasuries, if his rounds had ceased, for he gave them most astonishing bargains. They rejoiced in him, and he would not disappoint them.

Then, too, his trading all unconsciously kept his mind just sufficiently occupied to retain its balance. He never reasoned about it, but he felt that it was better to have something to do besides brooding constantly on the past and the future.

Time enough he had for brooding indeed. Perhaps his purpose drew strength from occasional diversion from itself, perhaps he pondered it the more deeply and cogently when he returned from the slight intercourse he maintained with his fellows. If he had retired into the wilderness, as he had felt tempted to do, doubtless his wits would have become addled like Gnut's, in his lonely hut on the river bank.

But his purpose never failed. His gun was always oiled and loaded. His spear and his axe were always edged for slaughter. The one and only fear he had was lest his enemy should escape by some other death than the one he held for him.

And, since all things come to him who waits long enough, Stepan Iline's time came at last.

The waiting had been long. Full seven years had

passed since Katia died, but the bitterness of his hatred was in no wise blunted. Life for life, blood for blood — nothing less would satisfy him.

It was in the town of Krasnoiarsk that he heard the news.

“Great times!” said the host of his little inn cheerfully, when Stepan turned in to warm his half-frozen feet at the stove, after seeing to his horses and before leaving his papers with the police.

“Why then, Philip Alexandrovitch?” asked Stepan, with small interest.

“If you had arrived a day sooner, you would have seen them. Governor Tatukof arrived first last night, and very soon after him came his Excellency from Irkutsk, the great Paschkin. Tatukof had ten Cossacks and Paschkin had fifty.”

Stepan was listening now with every nerve on the strain, but he sat quietly, though the blood was jumping in his veins and drumming in his ears so that for a minute or two he could hardly hear the other speaking.

“They all went off this morning. Tatukof back to Minusinsk, and Paschkin for St. Petersburg. They say the Empress wants him for her right-hand man. They’ll have bad times there when Paschkin is right-hand man to the Empress. Ah, God, yes! He was wise to bring fifty Cossacks with him through his own country. There’s many a man there would give his head to break Paschkin’s, from all accounts. They

say he is the Devil. A bold man, too. His Cossacks go back to-morrow, and he went on this morning in two sledges, and they travelled, I can tell you. The Empress must want him badly, he was in such a hurry. What, you are off again? Do you not stay the night, then?"

"That depends," said Stepan, controlling himself mightily. "I have a call to make. If it is not successful I may have to go on at once to Abrova," — ten miles away on the road to Minusinsk, on the same side of the river as Paschkin was on, — "and as I must travel fast to catch my man, I will leave my house with you. You must keep it safe till I return, Philip Alexandrovitch, and see to my little white owl. If my man has left Abrova, I must follow him."

"Da! You travellers! Such bustle always. You have not time to eat or drink."

But Stepan was halfway down the street, thinking as collectedly as the jumping blood in his head would let him.

An hour later he was speeding as fast as three horses could carry him along the Tomsk road. He had left the town, indeed, as though for Abrova, but once clear of it had made a circuit across country, over the snow, till he struck the road along which Governor Paschkin had travelled only that morning.

He calculated that Paschkin had at least twelve hours' start of him. He would have the pick of the

horses at every town or village. The chances of catching him were small, unless by the accidents of the road, but it was in those chances of the road that his hope lay. It might be days, it might be weeks, before he caught him. He was prepared to follow if it took a year.

The hot blood that raced in his veins lifted him above any feeling of cold or weariness. For seven long years he had waited, round the corner of a mighty hope as it were, and at last that for which he had waited lay in the open before him. And so the blood raced in his veins and galloped in his head, and he chirruped and called to his horses, and felt like shouting aloud for joy of the hour that was coming, — that must come, he said to himself, — that should come, no matter what stood between, now that the quarry had broken cover at last.

In these few short hours, since he heard of Paschkin's journey, he had lived more vitally than in all the last seven years.

No one would have believed that this keen-faced man urging his horses along the snowy road was the same who plodded wearily into Krasnoiarsk a few hours before.

Nor was it.

That was Stepan Iline, the downtrodden of Paschkin.

This was Stepan Iline, the Avenger of Blood, on Paschkin's track.

Two very different men and yet at heart the same.

It was the change which takes place in the beast of prey, lying listless, with flexed limbs and half-closed eyes, when suddenly his quarry passes, and in a moment he is up and after it, every sinew strung, and death in the pinching of his tight-closed face.

In that short hour at Krasnoiarsk he had thought and acted quickly. The sledge and horses he had hired for a journey to Abrova, but had left their full value with the owner as pledge of their safe return. Their return at all was more than doubtful, but he would have no man suffer through him. He had bought provisions for many days, and by his side in the sledge lay his gun, his spear, and the axe with which he intended to deal Paschkin those three last satisfying blows, one for Baby Stepan, one for little Katenka, and one for Katia.

That Paschkin travelled with two sledges, which meant attendants, did not trouble him in the least. If the choice were given him, he would sooner fight his way to his man, inch by inch, with the other watching his coming and knowing what it meant, than find him lying helpless and open to his assault. He wanted to feel that mighty thrill of battle once again, with the death of Paschkin as its climax. And for these things he was ready to give his life. Ready? — ay, eager, keen-set, and as careless of consequences as a great

tusked boar of the woods; for, once he had settled with Paschkin, he had nothing left to live for.

The chase, barring much-to-be-desired accidents in front, might, he knew, be a long one. Two thousand miles of bad road lay between Paschkin and the Urals, and anywhere on that road the end might come, — the end of the chase, and the end of Paschkin, and maybe the end of himself.

And Stepan Iline drove his horses joyously.

## CHAPTER LIV

PASCHKIN had everything in his favour and all the advantages on his side. The pick of the horses was a great thing. Stepan, who had not laughed for years, laughed aloud as the idea occurred to him that, being just twelve hours behind, it was possible that he might be able to pick up Paschkin's discarded steeds. And then he fell gloomy at the second thought that, as far as was possible, he would do well, maybe, to avoid the towns and villages and skirt them over the snow.

His papers, indeed, gave him freedom of travel within the bounds of Siberia, except in Irkutsk, and only bound him to perpetual progress, and truly he would be progressing as never before. But any quick-witted official, with Paschkin's immediate visit in his mind, might well, at sight of Paschkin's harsh decree on his papers, put two and two together and fathom his intentions. Yes, it would be best to avoid the police as far as possible. And that meant slower speed and longer travel.

On the other hand, in spite of his impressive haste, Paschkin was not likely to travel himself to death. For how should he know that death was on his track,

and that every moment he lost brought it that much nearer to him?

He would halt each night to eat and sleep. There was a chance of minimising disadvantages and levelling odds somewhat there, for he himself felt as though he could rest no more till this matter was ended and done with. Then he would sleep his fill — when Paschkin slept too.

And then there were the accidents of the road which might, indeed, quite as likely befall himself as Paschkin, but in which he still reposed a certain hope.

So, day after day, he sped along, with the dogged persistence of a bloodhound, and the fell concentration of a starving wolf on a hot trail.

The north wind, keen as a knife from its thousand leagues of travel over the icy wastes, bit him to the bone. The snow whirled round him and plastered him into the semblance of a snow man, till at times he could not open his eyes and had to let his horses choose their own path. But cold and snow and the deadly desolations of the steppes were nothing to him, since his heart was on fire and his brain on the boil.

He found accommodation at night where he could, — in outlying cottages, where also he renewed his supplies for himself and his horses, — and many times, when no shelter offered, he camped out under the trees and built huge fires, and suffered not much in spite of the cold, because of the fiercer fire within.



He ate at night and as he went along, but only because one must eat to live, and grudged every moment when he was not on the road. Thought for his horses brought him to a halt many times when his own will would have urged him on. The horses were wearing out in spite of all his care, but he renewed them, one after another, by sale and barter, as necessity compelled and opportunity offered; and since money was of small account with him compared with the compassing of his ends, those with whom he dealt had no reason to complain of their bargains.

He heard from time to time reports of Paschkin's passage, always just ahead of him and always going at speed. He had no fear of missing him, for there was but one safe road into Russia, and Paschkin had too much at stake to take cross-country risks.

Then a strange slice of luck befell him, as once before in time of need.

He was gliding swiftly along very early one morning, and the monotonous beat of the horses' feet, and the smooth hiss of the runners, and the boundless desolation of the white waste all round, with the darker sky shutting down on it at the edges, had made him sleepy in spite of the fact that he had only just taken the road. His chin was on his chest and he saw nothing, when suddenly his team shied violently and he drew rein.

By the roadside lay a sledge turned completely upside

down, with a couple of horses shivering patiently alongside.

Stepan looked round in surprise for the owner, and, seeing none, leaped out and went up to the sledge, while his steaming horses looked round at the starvelings in surprise, and the latter whinnied joyfully at sight of their kind.

He turned the sledge over and found the owner underneath, dead, frozen stiff. From his face he thought it likely he was drunk when the catastrophe occurred, and had frozen where he lay. There was nothing to show what had happened, except that the rear corner of the sledge was smashed in as from a heavy blow. As a matter of fact, Paschkin's driver, the night before, finding the drunkard blocking the road, and failing to rouse him to a sense of his duty by shouting, had cannoned him neatly out of the way, and Paschkin had laughed hoarsely and promised his man an extra drink on the strength of his performance.

Stepan was feeling inside the dead man's clothes for his papers, when an idea shot through his mind which made his eyes flash hopefully.

He found the papers and a belt of money. He hesitated at the latter, but finally strapped it round his own waist. He doubted if it would fall into honester hands than his own. From the papers he would learn who the man was, and, if opportunity offered, the money should be sent to its rightful owner. For the papers

he had a use of his own. They would shorten his journey and bring him the quicker to Paschkin.

He learned from the papers that the man was one Ignat Pestal from Orkaorsk, away down in the south of Tomsk. He had been journeying evidently the same way as himself. For the moment the idea occurred to him of leaving his own papers on the dead man and changing names with him. But there were things to be said on both sides of that question, and he could not wait to follow them out to their possible ends. He stuffed the papers into his breast, dragged the dead man's sledge off the road, laid him in it, and covered him and it with snow. Then he loosed the shivering horses and tied them behind his own sledge, and set off again at speed to make up for lost time.

Now his way was clearer. As Ignat Pestal he would drive boldly into the next village, and there would be no more time wasted going round to avoid it. As Ignat Pestal he could follow Paschkin without exciting the suspicion of the most wide-awake official. Ignat Pestal, living, might or might not have been a good and useful citizen, but in his death he served another as he never could have served him in his life. Paschkin's driver's humour of the previous night seemed like to turn out none too prosperously for his master.

For the sake of the strange horses, Stepan made an early halt that day. He exchanged the newcomers' gear for rope halters, and soon after dark drove into a

good-sized village and sought accommodation at the inn.

He was Ignat Pestal of Orkaorsk, travelling in the horse line to Tobolsk. His Excellency, Governor Paschkin, had passed through early that morning, and the landlord was very full of the great man, of whom he had indeed caught only a glimpse, but quite enough to provide him with talk for many days.

“The Empress has sent for him, they say, to keep the Don Cossacks in order. Da! It is good to be a strong man and to be sent for by the Empress. They say he is the Devil himself, and that is the kind of master those Cossacks need, for, see you, they are devils too. Horses? Yes, surely. One is always open to a deal if there is anything in it. Which do you want to sell?”

Stepan made a very early start next morning and was glad to get safely away.

There was another trader at the inn, one of those industrious busybodies who knows everybody's business better than his own. As soon as he heard the name Pestal he asked: “Any relation of Ignat Pestal of Orkaorsk? I have met him.”

“Cousin,” said Stepan, briefly.

“And where is the good Ignat now?”

“He is behind,” said Stepan, with a jerk of the head.

“You do not favour him. He is round as a tub, with a face like a winter sun. You are thin as a pole and

your face is like a hawk's," and the knowing one laughed at his blunt wit. "Your father was a careful man, I bet."

"He was a careful man."

"If the jovial Ignat favoured your side of the house a trifle more, he would be none the worse. Not too much, but a trifle. Last time I saw him he was drunk, and I said to him, 'Ignat, my friend,' I said, 'sometime you'll take an overload of vodka and you'll be picked up by the roadside frozen as stiff as a dead horse,' and that frightened him so that he ordered more vodka and got drunker still at thought of it. You are going to Tobolsk?"

Stepan nodded.

"We might travel together. Company is good across the great steppe. It is a hard winter, and they say the wolves are very hungry out there. I met a traveller who had had a race with them and escaped by the skin of his teeth. He, too, needed much vodka before he got the taste of them out of his mouth. Landlord, another glass. And you?" But Stepan shook his head. "He swore he would never cross the steppe alone in winter again if he had to wait a week for company. We will go together."

"I travel quickly," said Stepan. "There is a man waiting for me over there and I must not disappoint him."

"The quicker the better across the steppe," said the

other, "especially when the wolves are out. I will travel quickly, too. When do you start?"

"At daylight."

"Da! That is early," and he looked doubtfully across at the tense dark face and smouldering eyes.

And "bozhe-moï!" he said to the landlord next morning, when he heard that Stepan was already on his way, "I am not sure but what I would as soon travel with the wolves. That man is mad."

And the landlord agreed that there was something queer about him; but he undoubtedly knew a good horse when he saw one and was a free hand at a bargain.

## CHAPTER LV

STERN chase, long chase; but even the longest must end at last one way or the other.

For fifteen days Stepan Iline followed Paschkin over the snowy wastes, straining his own powers of endurance and urging and husbanding his horses' to the utmost. At times he gained on him slightly and at times he lost. For Paschkin held the trumps as regards relays of horses, and though fear had no part in the composition of his spur,—since he was unconscious of pursuit,—yet he was urged to speed by motives little less worthy the craving for power and personal advancement.

The court was a hotbed of intrigue. The Empress had sent for him. Every minute, until he arrived and grasped the offered reins in his own strong hands, was big with possibilities of reverse. And so he whirled across the snowy plains, and floundered through the drifts, and bumped over the rocks, regardless of everything but one,—that the minutes flew faster than he, and that any one of them might be his undoing.

Toward the end of the time, since Pestal's papers allowed him to keep the road, Stepan found himself steadily gaining ground.

Paschkin travelled faster, but Iline travelled longer, and allowed himself no more rest than Nature absolutely insisted on.

Paschkin's bold eyes saw a mighty future dancing before him on the endless white wastes. Iline's fiery caverns saw no farther than Paschkin, lying shorn of further harm to his kind, in a muddle of bloody snow.

When he drove up about midday to the little inn at Zarnskaya, he found himself nearer to his quarry than he had dared to hope.

"You will stop the night, barin?" asked the landlord, when he got out to stamp the cramp out of his feet and to get a glass of vodka, for it was bitterly cold. The sky was black above the snow and the north wind swept between the two like a scythe.

"I go on," said Stepan.

"It is madness," said the landlord. "You are all mad together to-day, and some of you will pay for it. Ah, God, yes! There were others here over night intending to start at daybreak, as one must to cross the steppe. It is one hundred and twenty versts, and the wolves are out, and it is going to snow again, and those things mean death. One of their sledges broke a runner when they started and they had to get it mended, and they started three hours late. I did my best to get them to wait till to-morrow, but they thought I was thinking only of myself. They will find it was of them I was thinking before they are done with it. The



steppe is a hungry devil, and the wolves are hungry devils, and they will all get fed to-day. You go to your death if you go on, barin."

"I go all the same."

"You are all mad together. Pity you did not get here in time to go with the other madmen."

"I wish I had. Perhaps I shall catch them."

"Then you can all die together. It is better than dying alone."

"Akh! hear the snow!" he said, as Stepan drew his sheepskin coat up above his ears and went toward the door.

And it was to be both seen and heard. The wind had increased since he went into the house. The stout wooden eaves hummed in it, the whirling flakes shot past on the level with a venomous hiss. The shaggy coats of his horses were thick with it already. They hung their heads with their ears laid back and looked askance at him.

"And you go?" said the landlord once more, in final remonstrance at folly so great.

"Yes, I go," and he cleared the snow from his seat and drew the sheepskin over his knees and was gone.

"There will be so many madmen the less in the world. Ah, God, yes!" said the landlord, philosophically, as he shut the door.

Paschkin but two hours ahead of him! What were wind and snow and hungry devils of steppes and wolves,

with Paschkin but two hours in front? There was that inside him that was hungrier than steppe or wolf. The hunger that had waited seven long years to be fed. And now that which it sought was only two hours ahead. The hunger ravened within him.

His gun lay at his right hand snugly covered from the snow, his spear at his left hand, and in his belt hung the axe that was to take payment in Paschkin's blood for Baby Stepan, and little Katenka, and Katia.

Now and again he dashed the snow out of his face and peered through his narrowed lids at the whirling waste in front. There was no mistaking the road across the steppe, for its course was marked by gaunt skeletons of trees stuck up at regular intervals. He could not indeed see fifty yards or fifty feet, but the road was straight, and so long as the skeleton trees sped silently past him he was keeping to it.

The wind bit like an axe, but he was too hot inside to feel it. The horses plunged through the gale with their heads down, and flung them up every now and again to shake the snow out of their eyes and ears. And their driver leaned forward with a face like a hawk, and every now and again he dashed the snow away and peered into the whirling waste in front.

It seemed as if the whole world were emptying itself against him, in showers of white arrows out of a black sky. But he heeded them not. He would not turn, though the black sky itself came tumbling down on

him and emptied itself in one fell crash, not if his horses could struggle through the fragments.

For Paschkin was on in front there. He might find the gale too much for him and turn back. Any moment they might come face to face. He felt for his gun with one hand, and shifted the reins and felt for his spear with the other, and shifted them again and loosened the axe in his belt.

And then, dashing away the snow and peering ahead, he saw, close upon him, a sledge coming slowly to meet him, like a wounded animal.

He eyed it like a hawk. His eyes gleamed through the snow that plastered them in a moment.

There were three men in the sledge. They shouted to him, but he sped on. None of these was the man he sought.

"God in heaven!" said one of the three in the other sledge. "Was that man or devil? Did you see its eyes?"

"It looked like a man," said one.

"It looked like a devil," said another.

"The steppe will find out," said the third.

## CHAPTER LVI

ON went Stepan into the mad white whirl, where Paschkin was, somewhere in front. On for another hour, for two hours, and still no sight of what he sought; but the gale slackened somewhat in its fury, and he could see farther ahead.

Then, as he crouched with lowered head like a great bird of prey, a sound other than the wind fell on his ear, keyed in a different tone, a sound he knew well, — wild yelpings and howlings, hideous snappings and snarlings, — wolves fighting over their prey. Not the long howl of the prowler, nor the short snarling yap of the trailing pack. These brutes had got something and were fighting over it. Please God it be not Paschkin! Ah! God! — to think of losing him so, after all these years! Then came other sounds along the wind. Thud! thud! at once sharp and dull through the muffling of the snow, but guns without doubt.

And then he was on them before he could stop.

A sledge still standing, one outside horse down, with a dozen wolves tearing and rending at it. The other two plunging and kicking and biting for their lives.

A bristling hedge of wolves round the sledge. A burly

man in furs holding on to the cover with one hand, and slashing wildly at the bloody fangs on each side with a sword in the other. A hopeless fight! They were scrambling up the back, leaping at the sides, twenty to one. An impossible fight!

All this Stepan Iline grasped in one single glance as he swept up at a gallop.

His sledge bowled over half-a-dozen of the bloody fangs as he passed.

He could barely draw in his own terrified horses, but managed it at last, and leaped out into the snow, and ran back, dragging out his axe as he went.

Were the bloody fangs to cheat him of his prey? After seven years!

He shouted as he ran, but knew not what he shouted. Then he was in among them, shouting still and hacking wildly at leaping brown bodies and snarling fronts. And the mad thrill of slaughter ran up through leg and loin as they tightened to the fight; up through muscle and sinew, through hand and arm, as the hungry axe bit death through bristling hide and crunching bone, and he felt life die close under his hand; up into his brain, till he saw nothing, thought nothing, felt nothing but blood-red, snarling fangs, and blood-red eyes, and gaping bloody wounds wherever his keen axe fell.

They leaped at his throat, with gnashing teeth, and scabbling claws, and yellow-green flaming eyes like fiends incarnate, and he laughed aloud as he shore them

down. The smell of them — their fetid breath and stinking bodies — was in his nostrils in spite of the wind. His heart and brain were bursting with the lust of slaughter. He was Berserk, and nothing could withstand him.

The back of the sledge was cleared. He swung round the side and cleft the head of a brute that was climbing in there in spite of the man with the sword. They were still swarming on the foundered horse, and he cleft them as they fought, and they fell with their mouths full of meat.

The driver, with his arms laced in the reins, had been doing his best to restrain the plunging horses. He was jerked suddenly from his seat and fell headlong into the turmoil in front. Stepan had no time to help him. If he was to die so, he must die. He did not hate him to the point of saving him for a keener death.

The burly man in fur had managed to hold his own fairly well. He made good play with his sword and kept the brutes at bay, but could do little more. Then Stepan heard a hot oath, and from the corner of his eye he saw what had happened. The swordsman had transfixed a great brute on the spring. It twisted as it fell, and the sword snapped at the hilt, and now the big man stood kicking furiously with his big boots at the gnashing mouths that menaced him.

That was unprofitable fighting and could not last long. It needed close quarters, and a short axe, and a

brain but one remove from madness, to cleave them in pieces and strike terror into the rest.

And that Stepan did. When at last he found no leaping body to hack at, and stood panting and spent, the snow was like a shambles, and the edge of his axe was blunted.

Close upon a score of gaunt bodies lay about, horribly mangled, and the rest had limped away, all save one. It stood alongside the dead horse, still tearing and eating ravenously.

Stepan strode at it. It looked up at him as he came, but went on wolfing the unexpected meal without a pause. He remembered that strange, reproachful look in the famished green eyes for many a day. He cleft its head, and it fell with its mouth full of red meat, and as it rolled over he saw two untimely pups sucking hard at its shrivelled dugs. They were very small and very hungry, and they went on sucking at the mother who had died doing her best for them. The pack, he perceived, had been on the prowl, this belated mother among them, when Paschkin's sledge ran into them; and while the fighters fought, she had turned her opportunity to account.

Scarce knowing what he did, but with an instinct of pity for their forlorn estate, Stepan picked up the cubs and stuffed them inside his sheepskin.

He saw the driver lying among his horses' feet, but whether he was alive or dead he did not know. The

horses stood still now, shaking with terror, but not moving a hoof, as though they feared to harm the man.

Then the burly man in fur, as he stood panting in the sledge, looked at him, and said, "By God, man, but you are a fighter!"

And Stepan looked on Paschkin's face for the first time in nine years.

It was very little altered, fuller and redder beneath the big red beard, but otherwise as he had known it,—hard, brutal, domineering.

Paschkin did not recognise him. That was not surprising.

"Who are you, and how came you in the nick of time to save our lives?" He got heavily out of the sledge and came toward him.

Stepan gazed at him and tightened his grip on his axe.

"Before God, I believe the fighting has addled his wits," said Paschkin. "What is wrong with you, man?" and he came closer.

Stepan swung his thirsty axe in his hand and looked at him, and Paschkin saw that looking out through his eyes which brought him to a stand.

"You are Paschkin," said Stepan at last, in a voice that was raucous and broken, a voice which had in it all the years of waiting, all the years of suffering, all the years of loneliness and brooding madness; had in it,



too, something of these last strenuous minutes of blood and slaughter.

“I am Stepan Iline.”

“Iline? — Iline? —” said Paschkin, vaguely. He had not thought of the man for years. “Well, I will reward you.”

“Nine years ago,” came the harsh voice again, “you broke my life. You robbed me of home and wife and children. All these years I have waited for you. For fifteen days I have followed you. Now you are to die for my little Katenka, and for little Stepan, and for Katia.”

“Little Katenka?” said Paschkin.

The man was mad, as he had supposed. Now he was sure of it. He turned and ran to his sledge to seek a weapon. But Stepan was the quicker, as offence is quicker than defence. He hurled himself against the other with such force that he stumbled and fell, and Stepan sprang into the sledge.

He had not done with him yet. One blow as he lay would have ended him. But he had not suffered enough yet. He must taste death slowly. Nine bitter years were not to be wiped out with one hurried blow.

Paschkin picked himself up and wondered to find himself alive.

Stepan stood in the sledge and swung his axe slowly.

“Here you die,” he said hoarsely, “for all the ill you have wrought your fellows. But you shall die slowly.

You shall taste death inch by inch, as you have dealt it. One blow for little Stepan, and one for little Katenka —”

“Little Katenka!” echoed Paschkin once more in astonishment.

“— and one for Katia. And then you will be dead, and all that you have been thinking will be gone from you. And it is for little Stepan and Katenka —”

“Katenka!” said Paschkin again.

“— and for Katia that you die.”

And then a wonder happened.

Something moved beneath his feet in the sledge and the fur robes tumbled over, and a little child sat up among them, — a fair child in a close-fitting fur capote, from under which streamed a halo of fair curls, a girl-child with a pitiful sweet face, white and drawn with fear, and blue eyes running tears.

And Stepan gazed down at her with amazement. She was so very like his own little Katenka who lay out there on the hillside by Chernsk.

She looked wildly round and clasped her little fur-mittened hands, and catching sight of Paschkin in the snow, she cried: “Oh, little father! Are they gone? The dreadful beasts?”

“They are gone, my little Katenka,” said Paschkin, in a voice the like of which Stepan had never heard from him before.

“Katenka! Little Katenka!” gasped Iline, and

his thirsty axe stopped swinging, and he gazed down at her with blazing, hungry eyes.

The snow fell into her face as she looked wonderingly up at him — so like, so very like, his own little Katenka who was gone. She brushed it off with her furry hands, and stared up at him with terrified blue eyes and quivering lips. So like! Oh, so like! So like!

“Oh, little father, don’t let him kill me! The dreadful man, don’t let him kill me!” she shrieked in an agony of fear, and squeezed her furry hands tight against her ears, as though to shut out sound of death, but could not tear her eyes from the terrible figure that towered above her.

And at that Paschkin lowered his bull head and rushed blindly at Stepan with a roar, on the poor chance of getting into grapple him, and Stepan raised his red axe for the blow he had hungered for all these years.

“No! no! no!” shrieked the child at his feet, and clasped her arms round his big boots.

Then, of a sudden, something happened to him, something which he never fully understood, though he often tried to grope back to the roots of it afterward.

It was as if something snapped inside him, as if something went out of him and left him suddenly weak and powerless for harm. And he knew that in the face of this new little Katenka he could not carry out his purpose, and that Paschkin must live. Instead of the red axe edge the bull head met the heave of a mighty

shoulder, and Paschkin reeled over into the snow among the dead wolves, and wondered once more to find himself alive.

And Iline heaved a great sigh, a sigh which seemed to rend him in twain. It told of cleavage. In that moment the past died and the future was born, inchoate, formless, void.

For seven years he had lived for one sole object, and in a moment all that he had lived for died, brushed aside by a tiny, quivering face and a pair of terrified blue eyes and a mass of yellow curls, even as the little furred hands brushed aside the snowflakes which fell upon these things.

He felt suddenly old and weary, and weak and empty. He looked at the child, and then he looked at Paschkin, who had picked himself up and stood stormily defiant in the snow, wondering, but not afraid, and meditating another onrush.

Once again, at sight of him, Iline swung up his axe irresolutely. But his own little Katenka looked up at him out of the terrified eyes of the child at his feet, and it fell again.

"Before God, I cannot," he muttered, and he shook himself free of her and stumbled blindly out of the sledge, and was lost in a moment behind the screen of falling snow.

Paschkin waited to see if he would return, then came up to the sledge.

"Lie down, dushenka," he said gently, "and I will cover you from the cold."

"Is the bad man gone, little father?" asked Katenka.

"He is gone, little one. He will not harm you. Lie down now, while I see if Mikhail is alive or dead."

He covered her with the furs, found one of his empty pistols and loaded it carefully, and then peering round into the snow and seeing nothing, he turned to the man who lay among the horses' hoofs.

He soothed the terrified beasts with words which they understood. He was ever a lover of horses and they recognised it. He went in between them and drew the man out from among their nervous feet. He was not dead, but senseless from an unintentional kick before they knew he was there.

Then Paschkin unhooked the dead horse and led the other two and the sledge away from it. He spoke encouragingly to the others, and saw that the outside one was bitten in many places and had lost blood. It had frozen in cakes on her rough skin. The other, the shaft horse, was in better case, but both trembled still as if taken with the staggers.

Paschkin shook his head as he looked them over. Thirty miles to go, he reckoned, at the very least, and those two shivering beasts could never do it with the laden sledge.

He pondered the matter gravely. It was a matter of life or death.

He could lighten it somewhat by jettisoning his personal effects. He considered the idea of leaving Mikhail behind with them. He would be dead before they could send for him, of course. But as between the life of Mikhail and the lives of Paschkin and his daughter, there could be no question.

"The madman has spared us quick death for slow," he said to himself.

Before he was committed to a decision, however, the matter resolved itself. A clump of black figures loomed through the snow veil — Stepan Iline and his three horses — to Paschkin's vast and undying amazement.

He had followed them along the road and found them half a mile away, anchored to one of the skeleton trees by the broken sledge. They had bolted from the wolves when he leaped out, and the sledge flying from side to side, had ended by crashing into one of the trees and jamming so tightly round it that the horses fell in a heap. On rising and finding themselves held, they stood.

Without a word he loosed Paschkin's two and tied the reins to the back of the sledge, harnessed his three in their places, and motioned the astounded Paschkin to get in. "The shafter is sound," said Paschkin. "Better use her," and Stepan saw the wisdom of it, and with some rearrangement of the gear succeeded in yoking the four abreast. Then they placed the unconscious Mikhail in the sledge and Paschkin gathered

his furs about him. Stepan picked up his whimpering wolf cubs from the snow where he had dropped them while working, tucked them into his coat, and climbed into his seat, and they sped away from the cluster of little white mounds which marked the scene of the fight.

## CHAPTER LVII

AND as the skeleton trees which marked the road whisked past them one by one, Paschkin thought over it all, and knew that he had been very near to death, and had escaped by a miracle which was past his understanding. And before him, on the great white sheet of the steppe, he pictured the panorama of the mighty future that should be his.

And Stepan Iline on the driver's seat looked out with vague and lustreless eyes, and saw nothing in front but a wide, white desolation. For the hope that had been in him — the one thing he had lived for all these years — was dead, and now he had nothing left to live for.

He felt the cold as he had not felt it before, for the fire that had warmed him for seven years was burnt out, and only the ashes were left. The snow fell upon him and covered him till he looked like a snow man. He did not even trouble to shake it off. The only warm spot about him was where the wolf cubs whimpered close above his heart.

More than once as they swept along, hour after hour, with the wounded horse panting heavily behind, Paschkin's eyes settled on the motionless white figure



in front, and under the hypnotising influence of the steadily falling flakes, and the swift backward rush of the white plain, strange thoughts came into his mind.

At times he felt an overpowering inclination to place his pistol to the back of that moveless head and end the man. He was a menace. He was beyond doubt mad. It would be but the raising of a hand and the pressure of a finger and the menace was gone for ever.

The madman had undoubtedly saved their lives from the wolves, but he had done it only for the purpose of his private vengeance. Why should he spare him?

Yet, again, he had abandoned that purpose under some strange impulse which could only be guessed at, and which Paschkin did not pretend to fully understand. The intention might spring up again at any moment and prove too much for him. Why should he spare him?

Paschkin fingered his pistol doubtfully and was strongly impelled to use it and suffer no risks. He decided to watch the man warily and at the first suspicious sign to make an end of him.

If he carried them through safely, he could hand him over to the police to deal with as they thought fit. That would undoubtedly be the best thing to do, both for the man himself and for the community at large.

But Stepan had no evil mind left in him. It was all a blank, and his dull thoughts carried him no farther than the next inn.

So, on and on across the endless white waste. The

snow ceased falling, but it had grown too dark to see the guiding trees; and Stepan at last drew rein, and the panting horses stood in a great cloud of steam and hung their heads and snuffled at the snow on the ground.

Paschkin fingered his pistol. Stepan got down heavily. He was cramped and half frozen.

"What now?" asked Paschkin, on the alert.

"I can no longer see the road," said Stepan. "The moon will come soon. We must wait," and he stamped his numbed feet and swung his arms one after the other to set the blood running again.

He went round and said a word to each of the horses in turn. The clouds of steam fell down on their backs in white rime. He brushed it off with his hand and spanked them over the loins to keep the cold from striking in. Presently he tucked his cubs into his inner coat and took off his sheepskin and laid it on the loins of the shaft horse, which was beginning to shiver.

Paschkin, warily observant of his every movement, saw him do it and said to himself, "The madman is good to his horses," and thereafter felt somewhat less suspicious of him.

He heard him go behind the sledge and wondered what he was up to. And the hair at the back of his head began to prickle, and he half expected to feel the edge of the axe in his neck. Then he heard him murmuring to the wounded horse and cheering it up, and his mind was at ease again.

Little Katenka, overwrought with her fears, had fallen asleep in her nest of furs when her father covered her up. She woke now with the sudden cessation of motion, and cried, —

“Little father, are you there?” and felt for him in the dark with her hands.

“I am here, dushenka,” said Paschkin, in the voice Stepan had found it difficult to reconcile with him.

“Are we there, little father?”

“Not yet, little one; we are waiting for the moon.”

“Where is the bad man? Is he gone? Did you kill him, little father?”

“He is seeing to the horses. As soon as the moon comes we shall go on. Lie down again and go to sleep.”

She lay still for a minute and then sat up, saying, “I cannot sleep. What is this, little father?” and she kicked Mikhail’s body with her toes.

“It is Mikhail. He is asleep.”

Stepan moved about the horses, patting them and spanking them, and straining his ears to catch every note of her prattle. So like! — so like! But his little Katenka lay on the hillside by Chernsk. And it was Paschkin sent her there. And this was Paschkin’s little Katenka.

Vaguely, like a bat in the night, the idea flitted across the blankness of his mind, that it was still in his power to kill Paschkin and make this little Katenka his own. It would only be taking from Paschkin what Paschkin

had taken from him. And once his hand stole up to the axe in his belt, but he dropped it again with a sigh. He knew it could not be. Then he ran his hand gently under the breeching of the horse near him, and separated the leather from the skin, to which it was freezing with the sweat.

At last the moon broke through the clouds, which trailed mistily across her face for a time and then cleared off and left a clear dark sky, and the white plain stretched suddenly to a wide horizon.

Stepan put on his sheepskin coat and climbed into his seat, and the horses sprang forward at a gallop, and were glad to be on the move again.

"Ah, there is the bad man who wanted to kill me with his chopper!" said little Katenka. "You won't let him kill me, little father."

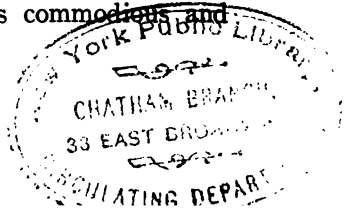
"He doesn't want to kill you, little one."

"He looked as if he did, little father. He looked as if he would eat me."

"He will not eat you, little one."

Stepan would have liked to hear her talking, even though it was only hard words about himself. But the cold air made her glad to muffle her head in the robes, and presently her prattle died away, and she fell asleep again.

It was long after midnight when they reached the inn on the edge of the steppe. Tsarinsk itself lay five miles farther on, but the inn was commodious and



did good business with the teamsters crossing the steppe.

Paschkin, with little Katenka sound asleep in his arms, hammered on the door till the landlord opened it in a surly humour, which changed suddenly to oily obsequiousness when he learned who his visitor was. Stepan and an ostler, surly like the landlord at being roused out of his bed, carried the still unconscious Mikhail in and laid him on the floor. Then the man showed Stepan where he could stable the horses, and retired to his lair, leaving him to his own devices.

He mechanically rubbed down the horses, and washed the bitten one, and put some ointment on its wounds, and made them all comfortable in the great stable which had accommodation for thirty horses and held only half a dozen. He made a nest of hay for his whimpering cubs, but had no food to give them. He felt no hunger himself, though he had eaten nothing since the morning, and the day had been a wasteful one. He took a drink of water from a straw-swaddled barrel in the stable and lay down alongside his shaft horse, the one over which he had spread his sheepskin.

He did not sleep and he did not think. He just lay vacuous, spent and weary, now that nothing remained to be done.

As he began to grow warm his own wounds began to make themselves felt. They grew so uncomfortable

at last that he had to bestir himself and dress them, and then, in greater comfort, he slept.

Paschkin, when he had eaten and drunk his fill of the best the place could afford, which nevertheless excited his voluble comminations, lay down on his bed. But he had eaten and drunk so much that it was long before he slept. And in the ensuing wrestle with the slippery god his brain grew so active that by degrees, and with no desire thereto, he found himself recalling the long-forgotten episode of Stepan Iline. It was only one among so many, and he had not once thought of him for quite seven years.

He recalled it now as somewhat of a stroke of genius on his part. He had not made up his mind what to do in the matter when at last he fell asleep.

In the morning, when he sent to inquire after the man, he found that he had set off at daybreak with his three horses to recross the steppe.

## CHAPTER LVIII

WHEN Stepan woke after a brief sleep, there was but one idea in his mind, and that was that here Paschkin could command power again. He had spared Paschkin's life, he had perhaps saved it, but he mistrusted Paschkin.

He fed his horses and got a supply of food for himself and them, and then, to the landlord's surprise, purchased from him an old Tatar saddle that lay in the stable, and announced his intention of returning at once at Zarnskaya.

"But — his Excellency?" said the other, agape.

"His Excellency?" said Stepan, vaguely, "his Excellency is nothing to me," and finished buckling the saddle on to his trusty shaft horse and climbed on to its back, with his wolf cubs in his breast, and started off across the snow.

Peter Krop had long since given him up for dead. By dint of pertinacious inquiry he had run the house on wheels to earth in the yard of the inn at Krasnoiarsk, where it stood awaiting Stepan's return. But no amount of inquiry availed to cast any light on what had become of Stepan himself. He had started for Abrova but never arrived there, and at last Peter Krop gave him up as lost.

The housewives of Yeniseisk missed him sorely, and many of their wants had to go unfilled, or to be filled at a price that caused their slender pockets to miss him more sorely still. At one time, all along the line, a thrill of hope passed through them at sight of the house on wheels coming along just as it used to do. But it was only Peter Krop, who had purchased it from the innkeeper at Krasnoiarsk when they had decided at last that Stepan was dead, and the spoiled wives of Yeniseisk found Peter a much harder man to deal with than Stepan had been. For old Peter's business instincts would have required a fair profit even on his death-bed.

So Peter Krop mourned the only friend he had ever made outside his own race, and jogged along in his place, though at longer intervals, since he had rounds of his own to do as well. He took a mournful pleasure in occupying the house on wheels, and in his fancy tried to people it again with the bright face of Katia and little Katenka and Baby Stepan.



## CHAPTER LIX

AND far away, in a strange northern land, a strange man was living a strange wild life.

It was a land apart. He was a man apart. Place and man suited one another exactly.

It was, and still is, save for a few brief weeks in the summer, the most unutterably desolate land on the face of the earth. In the winter the temperature falls as low as seventy degrees below zero. The ground is frozen solid to the depth of many hundreds of feet. In the summer the surface thaws to the depth of a foot or so, but nothing ever penetrates the icy barrier below. All the vegetation of that strange lone land springs therefore from that foot of water-soaked surface soil, and the vegetation is in keeping with the rest.

Life there is at its very lowest — just twelve inches or so removed from frozen death.

It is the great moss-land. Almost the only thing to be seen is moss, — living brown moss growing on gray moss dead, growth upon growth; and creeping lichens here and there, till for thousands of miles the surface of that land is one vast sponge, whereon and wherein, if any man try to walk, he sinks to his waist, to his shoulders, or completely out of sight.

And into this strange land the strange man crept one day and dwelt there.

He had journeyed he knew not how or whence. There was a void in his mind, with a dangling thread in it which he strove in vain to grasp. Always it lay just beyond him, but some strange impulse had driven him on and on in hopes of laying hold of it in time.

So he had journeyed doggedly on through the mighty forests which belt the Northern Spirits into their dreary holds, and ward off their coldest breaths from the plains below. For months he had wandered through age-old growths of shivering poplars and aspens, and mighty elms and maples, till these gave place to firs and pines and larches.

He had fallen in with companies of the hardy dwellers in those northern woods, whose language he could not speak, and whose habits were strange and uncouth even to him. He had joined them silently, lived with them silently, and departed as he came; and, uncouth as they were, they had recognised his affliction and had suffered him as one stricken of the gods.

Wherever he went, at his heels gambolled two shaggy wolf-pups, and the only thing that ever roused him from his lethargy was menace to these. He was gentleness itself, but once, when a wood-dweller threatened his pets with an axe, the silent one flamed like Hekla, and the woodman escaped with his life, — and food for thought and time to think it.

And so, on and on, till the vast solemnities of the forest-land lay behind, and he crept silently through straggling patches of dwarfer growths, stunted pines and twisted larches, cringing bitterly before the blasts that racked them ten months out of the twelve.

He had travelled along a watercourse which carried a projecting arm of the final forest-land out into the moss-country. It stretched like a peninsula far into the treacherous gray-brown bog-land.

He went on till even the dwarf trees failed him and further advance meant death. Then he stood on the edge of the moss and in some strange way it appealed to him. It was a waste and empty land. He was a waste and empty man. He desired no intercourse with his fellows, and here was no man but himself.

The gloom of the interminable woods had weighed upon him like the stones on a hillside grave. Here were light and air and infinite space; as far as his eye could travel, in front and on either side, nothing but the soft gray-brown cushiony plain, with sheets of water here and there, and, marvel of marvels, on the hither edge, among the stunted pines and larches, actually some tiny flowers. Not the gorgeous blooms which carpeted the steppes, but still flowers, though their time was as short, and their aspect as thin and watery, as the sources from which they sprang.

It was summer time when he came upon the moss-

land, and his vacant mind was still too numb to forecast the terrors of winter in such a place.

He still had his axe, the axe that was to have done some great deed and had not. His mind was in a fog, but he knew the axe had something to do with the matter. He would sit by the hour looking at it and groping for the lost threads which seemed to centre in it. But he felled stunted trees with it and built himself a tiny hut on the edge of the moss, a rough enough abode, in sooth, but while the mild weather lasted it sufficed for wool-gathering wits.

Of food there was no lack, for the time being. For the spawning salmon were still in the river, in quantities so vast that he had them for the taking, and hunger knows no close time. And as he sat, day after day, gazing listlessly over the infinite expanse of the moss, he saw it mottled in places with countless flights of birds. And, desiring them, he and his wolf-pups essayed a trip on the spongy plain and came near to ending there. He sank up to his waist at once, and all his struggles only took him the deeper, while the four-footed ones went completely out of sight.

They all managed to crawl out at last, however, like drowned rats, and sat looking at the birds for the rest of the day with desire increased by impotence.

In the morning, with no conscious evolution of the idea, rather by an instinct of necessity, he bound flat pieces of wood to his feet with withes of plaited bents

and rushes, and, with a pole for support, proved himself master of the bog. And so, for a time, eggs and young birds were added to their faring.

Fire he had, since flint and steel never left him, and while the summer lasted he fared well. And, as body strengthened, mind improved somewhat, but always with a misty vagueness as to the past, and, when he tried to get behind it, with racking pains in the head which at times prostrated him.

He had strange fancies too. In unexpected places he would come across those unexpected flowers, now and again — things of a day, brought by the unconscious birds, sprouting in decay and with little to feed on. And every flower he saw was a reminder of something, he knew not what — a tiny pin-prick on that dull thing that answered for his mind, which spurred it to further groping, but still left him ever in the dark. Nevertheless he gathered every flower he saw and carried it home with him.

As he drew near to the hut a dim expectancy would light his face. And then he would go inside and look round with a puzzled frown, and draw his hand wearily across his brow and try to remember. As with the axe, the flowers stirred the ruins of his mind, and he would sit by the hour gazing at them and trying in vain to understand their message.

## CHAPTER LX

His dulled thought had not yet forecasted the future in such a place. He lived from hour to hour and from day to day, and made no provision for the next, and so one day there came to him the rude awakening to which life with half-closed eyes is always subject.

For many days the sky was dark with flying birds, myriads of birds, and all flying the same way. The man sat stolidly watching them, and listening to their cries. And when they had all disappeared behind the low black line of stunted trees, the sky was gray and cold.

Black clouds swept up from the north. The great morass shuddered and wailed, and shrivelled before his eyes, as the icy gale came shrieking across it from far-away polar seas. Every growing thing lay flat before the storm. The moss was beaten as with a mighty flail and scored as with a mighty harrow, and came flying inland in flakes and blankets. The man's hut vanished with the first breath, and he lay prone with the rest, bitten by the wind, beaten by the rain. His companions fled howling to the nearest forest growth and grimped to earth in the first thicket they came to.

But the storm passed and the sun shone out again next day. The wolf-cubs came bounding back, unconscious of perfidy, since Nature had gifted them no more generously. And the man set stolidly to work to house himself again.

He built nearer the forest land this time, and his hut turned its back to the north winds. And he built more strongly, and blanketed his woodwork with great sheets of moss, piling it thick and deep, till his house looked like nothing but an outgrowth of the moss itself, a larger cushion from the cushiony plain.

And instinct made him burrow down now as well as build up. He dug out the stiff clayey earth with his axe, as deep as he could get, and lined the whole with mosses, live and dead, till the inside was a nest. He built a tiny fireplace of clay and cut down trees and hauled them home for firing. All sheer instinct of the primitive man for warmth and shelter.

Each day the sun was going. The birds had gone long since, and when he looked for salmon he found only belated stragglers. Before long these were gone too, and he had to roam the farther woods for berries, and grew lean and thin on them, and his wolves leaner still.

Each day now was shorter and grayer than the last, and the storms which came howling out of the north brought icy sleet instead of rain.

Then, one morning, he crept out of his nest to find

the world all white, the morass a wavering snow plain, all grooved and furrowed and fluted into fantastic whorls by the wind; and winter was upon him.

He could still find occasional berries in the woods, but ever more precariously, and when at last they failed him entirely, he tried a diet of bark but found no nutriment in it.

Then came a gale so merciless that for two whole days he dared not venture his head outside. The snow banked up deep and high behind his hut, and the fierce blasts welded it into an icy cuirass impervious to the keenest assaults of the storm fiends.

Outside, the wild winds shrieked and howled across the tortured wastes, and inside, his wolves whined mournfully over the misery of their stomachs. He began to eye them at last as hungrily as they eyed him. But they were all spared that extremity, though they came within sight of it, and sat and stared it in the face with hungry foreboding.

In his ravenous hunger for something to stay the groaning void within, he one time plucked a handful of the moss that formed his nest and stuffed it into his mouth. It took much chewing, but even chewing was akin to eating, and at last it slipped down and gave him some cold comfort.

He did his best to induce his starving companions to try it also, but they found no pleasure in it. He continued eating, and ruminated, in slow and bovine



fashion, while he chewed the cud, and then set to work on that which had come to him.

With infinite patience, he delved up clay from the lowest floor of his hut, kneaded it to a proper consistency with snow which he melted in his hands, and from it shaped a rude bowl. This he set to bake in the ashes of his fire, and sat and watched it till it cracked and fell in pieces along with his hopes.

He set doggedly to work again and made another bowl, and dried it more slowly, and baked it more cautiously, but the result was still the same.

There was no going outside, however, and he had plenty of clay, and before him lay months of semi-starvation unless he could make a pot that would hold water and stand fire. With all his shadowed mind concentrated upon this one thing he made pot after pot, cleansing his material now most carefully, in case the previous failures had been brought about through some alien mixture in the clay, and the wolves sat watching hopefully, such time as they could spare from dismal protest over their clamorous emptiness.

And at last he succeeded. One of his pots came out whole and hard and red, and when it had cooled, and he filled it with snow and placed it in the ashes again, he had got his desire.

He was cold inside with the amount of clammy pulp he had eaten. He melted snow and heated water and drank it for its comforting warmth. Then he filled

his pot again and shredded into it some handfuls of moss, and boiled it to a pulp, and found it not over-palatable, indeed, but more easily eaten than when raw. It stayed his stomach and he believed he could live on it, and the scraps he offered to his companions they bolted greedily and demanded more.

The storm ceased next day and he crept out into the strange new wintry world,—the moss-land all a mighty white plain, scored with league-long grooves by the flailing of the wind, and all its surfaces polished smooth and round; the dwarf trees of his peninsula almost hidden by the drifts; the smaller growths gone entirely; the sky up above grim and gray, and the light between but a glimmering twilight.

With his footboards he found he could travel freely, and the first thing he did was to go to the moss and dig down under the snow for a fresh supply, which he thought might be more eatable than his own partly withered stuff.

He took a new interest in it now. Hitherto it had been simply building material and bedding. Now it was food and life. He took note of the various kinds and kept them separate, for experimental purposes. Anything he came across which looked capable of boiling and eating, he took home for trial.

## CHAPTER LXI

To a man in full possession of his senses the vast silence and solitude must have been overpowering. Not so with this man. Since that night when something had seemed to snap suddenly in his head, he had been out of touch with his kind, and to a jangled mind silence and solitude are merciful ministers.

Then, too, he was not without companionship even in that immensity of desolation. The wolves were with him always, and their novel faring and utter dependence on him seemed to tame their natural instincts and make them more companionable.

But there were higher things than these, and unconsciously they made for strengthening and uplifting.

The sun had left him, indeed, and its going and not returning had filled him for a time with a great dread, and then with vague fears as to what this might portend. But the going of the sun had not left him in absolute darkness. For a portion of each month the moon shone clear and bright, and he was alone in a silent silver world. It was no longer snow he gazed upon then, but a mighty plain of frosted silver, fantastically chased and wrought, and soothing to the senses in the very sight of it.

And the friendly stars shone brilliantly by day and by night, as though they shone for him alone, and he came to know them well, though not one could he call by its name. And at times there were strange happenings up there, when one and another of the radiant twinklers would loose its hold with startling suddenness, and shoot silently across the darkness, and disappear, and leave him wondering.

Once, as he sat watching them, a sudden flash of steely blue scared him trembling to his feet. On the blacker darkness above there shone and died two trails of fiery smoke. It seemed to him that something fell with a hiss into the far-away moss. The earth shook under him and he crept into his house and lay in fear.

When the winds were loosed upon the flats, they woke strange sounds like mighty voices, wild wailings and sobbings and long-drawn dolorous groans as of spirits in travail, and at first these also filled him with fear. But he grew accustomed to them at last, since no harm came to him from them, and in time the weird voices became less irksome than the infinite silence.

But the greatest of all the wonders of that strange land came upon him one day as he sat, muffled in his sheepskin, striving in vain to lay hold of the something that was behind all this and himself, and which he could not grasp with all his striving. And so terrifying was it in its magnificence that he fell on his face in fear, believing that the end of all things had come.

For, of a sudden, and in a strange and solemn silence, the rim of the northern darkness began to pulse with tremulous hints of that which was to come, as though some great quivering heart of light was travelling into life down there in the dark.

Then, gathering force, the throbbing glow took shape in a nebulous haze, which rose and brightened till the top of it was a luminous arch, and from the arch streamed wavering tongues of fire, of colours innumerable and of a radiance unsurpassed. Now they were all blood-red, and now they were vivid blue, and now lightning-yellow. Then, in a moment, the wavering flames all mixed as though a mighty breath had swept across them, and green and violet and orange quivered into the upper darkness and dyed the snow fresh colours every second. Then, as quickly, the blending fires shone dazzling white; and again each darting tongue flashed all the various tints throughout its length from base to tip, red at the base, and yellow at the tip, and all the rest fluttering along it from end to end in strange, fitful pulsations.

So, for hours, the mighty spectacle played above him, and he, enthralled and spellbound, lay on his face in fear and only dared to look up now and again, wondering dimly what it all might mean.

Did they dance to some strange music, those mysterious lights? It seemed to him there must be music, but his dulled senses could not catch it. He strained

his ears and feared to breathe, and at times it seemed to him that he came very near to hearing it, and he thought it was like the singing of swinging bells — golden bells and silver bells.

And then at last the dancing lights waxed to their highest, and gathered in a lambent coronal above the arch, and slowly died away, and left the dark world the darker for their having been.

He crept back into his lair full of fears of what might follow. But nothing broke the silence of his dim world and he was filled with wonder and amaze, and as he lay in the darkness he saw the tongues of fire still quivering through his closed eyes, and in his ears was the singing of the bells.

He had no knowledge to bring to the matter, nothing but a vague, awe-stricken wonder; but in some dim way it seemed to him that God was in it, and his soul was strangely stirred.

But these were the bright times in the darkness of the desolate land. At other times the heavens were shut, grim and black, and out of the north, where the strange lights dwelt, came only storm and tempest. And then the snow-bound flats clanged with the rush and roar of it, and for days he and his wolves would lie in their sunken nest, trembling as the storm fiends howled and tore above them, but grateful all, in their various ways, for the thick snow covering that knit them safe to earth.

## CHAPTER LXII

It was then, when the storm fiends raged and fought above his hut, till the whole black vault and the vast untrodden spaces of the flats rang with the sound of them, that he heard the bells again — silver bells and golden bells, singing and swinging in the hollows of the storm.

And the sound of them stirred him strangely at times, and set him straining dumbly to get round the edge of the curtain that hung between him and the past. There were bells behind the curtain, and they meant something to him, but what it was he could not tell. And this elementary striving after knowledge racked his head with such pains that he would lie for hours with his head clasped tight in his hands to keep it from flying in pieces.

More than once, when the bells rang clear and close, and he could stand it no longer, he got up and went out into the shriek of the gale and wandered blindly over the frozen plain in search of them.

They led him hither and thither, — now he would stand listening eagerly; then he would set off running and stumbling, this way and that way, but wherever he went they were elsewhere.

One time, however, he came nearer to them than he had ever been before, nearer to the answers to all his puzzles and to all that he had lost out of his life.

It was terribly hard going, for the earlier storms had chastened the hummocky plain into nightmare flutings and convolutions, and these had been wrought into ice by the later flailings, and some were smooth as glass, and some were ribbed as though the bones of giants lay below, and some were sheaves of sharp-pointed spears, and some were hideous traps for stumbling feet.

But the bells sounded clear in his ears and he ran blindly on, now sprawling headlong, but scrambling up again always, heedless of cuts and bruises, heedless of everything but the calling of the bells.

And suddenly he found himself falling, falling, and then there came a crash, and then a great blank.

When he came to his senses, he found himself in utter darkness and silence in a hollow and windless place, and very sore and bruised. As he struggled to his feet a humming broke out all about him, and rose louder and louder till his head came near to splitting with the noise. He clasped both his hands on top of it, as was his wont, lest his wits should scatter altogether. Then the humming died and he was in silence again, and looking up he saw a patch of stars shining brightly above him.

In the darkness he tried to make out where he was,



but with small success. All about him, but at varying distances, was a wall of soft snow, and he perceived that he was in some way shut off from the wind, but how he could not tell.

Then, suddenly, as his slow wits pondered this, the whole place blazed with crimson light as though the heavens had burst into flame. And in the glow of it he saw a roof of ice above his head, and the ragged hole his fall had made in it. He had fallen from a height on to the thin icy covering of a drift, the snow had filtered away to some extent underneath, and he stood in a small chamber with snow walls all round him and a roof of ice ten feet above his head.

And out there the mystic lights were dancing. His little chamber was suddenly sun-lit with gorgeous orange rays, and in a moment was a ghastly livid green. Then the colours changed so rapidly, and blended in such strange confusions, that he could not follow them. He only knew that he could see, and what he saw was not helpful.

The hole he had come through was quite ten feet above his head, and it was in the middle of the sheet of ice which roofed him in.

He ran to the wall to try and climb it. It was soft and rotten and fell away before him. He tried the opposite side; it yielded in the same way. Wherever he tried, it was the same. He could scrape into it to his heart's content, but he could not climb it. All he

gained was a larger space. And the snow he scraped down was so friable and powdery that it vanished under him like dust, — the very ghost of snow. He might as well have tried to climb on mist or build a platform of it.

In panic rage at the futility of all his efforts, he flung his axe at the glimmering roof, but it only starred it and fell back softly at his feet.

Was there no escape? Was he to die in this trap? The blood boiled in his head in impotent fury.

And all the while the wonder-lights outside shimmered and blazed in terrifying glory, and every now and again some shift of the storm filled the hole he had made in the ice, and the hollow in which he stood, with that wild booming — deeper and louder now than at first — which came near to splitting his head.

Any moment the lights might go and leave him in the deeper darkness that always followed them. He raged round his cage like a forest beast in its trap.

The lights blazed above him till he could see their forking tongues through the hole in the ice. Then they dwindled and died, and he was in the dark. He fell on his face in the powdered snow and gave up the fight.

But, lying so, the storm in his blood quieted down, and presently his brain began to work — as it had not worked for many a day. The rush of blood had quickened it. He began to think.

The snow walls were soft. He could bore through them to any distance. The drift he was in must end somewhere. It could not go on for ever. If he could burrow in a straight line, he must come to something at last — either to the outside of the snow-bank or to the walls of the hollow in which it lay.

He sprang to his feet again. One place was as good as another, since he knew nothing of where he was. He began to work his way into the wall nearest him, tearing it down with his curved hands, while great soft masses came rolling down on top of him.

It worked up his arms and down his back, and ran down into his boots in streams, but he paid no heed to it. He grew hot, so hot at last that he had to take off his sheepskin coat, but he had to drag it with him lest a fall of the soft snow should cover it and lose it to him for ever.

The very softness of the snow, while it made for easy work, was against his progress. For every armful he tore down a dozen armfuls fell upon him, and so lightly was it packed that the roof of his tunnel was the sheet of ice which overspread the whole. He could not see it, but he could feel no roof of snow above his head.

He grew weary and empty, but he ground his teeth and went on burrowing doggedly. He had been passive and broken all these months. Now the fighting spirit was alive in him again and he was not going to be beaten.

When he grew so weary that he could not lift his arms for another drag at the snow, he wrapped himself in his sheepskin and slept where he fell. And when he woke he set to work again instantly.

It was a mighty hollow, and how long he worked he never knew. But at last his blindly scooping hands lighted on something more solid than snow, and, by the feel, he knew it was moss. He had worked through to the edge of the cup. He tore down a handful of the moss and began chewing it to stay his hunger. Then, when he had eaten and rested, he climbed up the moss bank, beat a hole in the rim of the icy shield, and scrambled cautiously up the hummock and sat on the top.

A sickle moon rode low in the sky and cast a faint light into the darkness of the snowy plain. He had no idea in which direction his hut lay, for his pursuit of the bells had been erratic. But his brain was working, if slowly and heavily still.

His hut lay on the edge of the moss toward the forest land. If he could get safely off the moss without stumbling into another pitfall, he must find the hut sooner or later by travelling this way and that along the edge. But he had no idea in which direction the edge of the moss and the forest land lay. Whichever way he went might be the wrong one, and he had no mind to fall below the ice again. So he sat on his hummock, pondering dully, and steaming in the frosty air till

there was a halo of tiny ice spicules falling all about him.

And as he sat peering into the dimness, this way and that, anxiety to be gone warring with fear of going the wrong way and so landing himself in further difficulties, two very strange things befell him.

Out of the dimness behind him some white-winged thing came wafting slowly along, its noiseless flight marked by a misty halo of falling frost flakes. It came close to him and circled twice so closely round his head that he could see its great round eyes seeking hungrily if perchance he might be good to eat.

It was a great white owl, and in some way, though he did not know it, the sight of it stirred the dead leaves of his memory, set fluttering the dark veil which hung between him and the past, brought him nearer to himself, through the sudden brain activity induced by his late exertions, than he had been since the old self fell away from him.

The white bird gave him up as unfit for food and winged silently away. Would it be going toward the shore or away from it? He could not be sure.

But as he still sat in doubt, his wandering eye lighted suddenly on a stealthy movement close beside him, and he held his breath and watched.

Up out of the hole through which he had just scrambled came a small white head, with very long ears which twitched spasmodically to and fro, and a nervous

little nose which discovered him instantly, and very large outstanding eyes which settled on him doubtfully, — a little arctic hare, which had without doubt burrowed under the snow after food and got caught there.

The man sat perfectly still. He had no thought of harming his little brother of the snows. The hare hopped lightly out, and sat up, sniffing eagerly all round, with one eye still on the smoking figure on top of the hummock. Then, having apparently got its bearings, it set off lightly across the snowy crust, and the man rose instantly and followed it.

He did not consciously reason the matter out — that the hare would almost certainly make for the woods, and that the woods were where he wanted to go. The hare had come out of the hole and was making for a safer place. He had come out of the hole and did not know which way to go. The hare evidently did know its way, so he followed it.

He kept to the hummocks as far as possible. When he came to a hollow he skirted it, and so he very soon lost sight of his little guide.

The last he saw of it, it was sitting up on a little height, with its ears twitching anxiously and one eye upon him. Then it scampered away and he marked its direction and followed, and presently found himself on solid earth.

And then, as he stood wondering which way to turn

for his hut, he heard a muffled howl which for the moment set the blood jerking in his veins. And then he recognised it as the voice of one of his wolf-cubs, and he turned and ran toward it.

## CHAPTER LXIII

THEREAFTER for many days he dwelt in the dark, with no companionship but his wolves, and the occasional moon, and the steady stars, and now and again, at rare intervals, those wonderful quivering tongues of fire. But all the time his dull mind was groping dimly for the meanings of things, and was coming nearer and nearer to that which it sought.

And as his mind slowly awakened, the long-continued darkness began to tell on him as it had not done before. He fell into the shadows. It seemed to him that he was accursed, and was doomed to dwell in the outer cold and dark for evermore. But whenever his stomach clamoured for food he shredded mosses into his pot, and fed himself and his household, and so they lived.

Meagre living, they say, produces high thinking. This man's living was but one degree above starvation. Perhaps it helped to clear his brain of its tangles.

In the depth of that long-drawn Arctic night there befell at last a happening which, in more ways than one, tended to his upbuilding.

He was sitting in his hut, slowly and painfully pondering as was his wont, when a sound without pricked his ears and set his blood tingling. It was very faint



and distant, but he recognised it instantly, and instinctively reached his hand for his axe. The wolves at his side stirred in their sleep, and whuffed uneasily, as though the sound had penetrated their dreams also. He rose quietly and went outside, fastening the door so that they should not follow.

The blood was jumping in his veins as it had not jumped for many a day. As the sound he had heard came nearer and nearer along the frozen plain, he recognised it,—the short, eager yelp of wolves hot on the chase.

Wolves? Surely at some time he had fought wolves. The recollection of it was very dim, but something stirred within him, his hand gripped his axe with new vigour, a thrill ran through him from foot to head, and he was nearer to his old self than he had been since the past dropped from him.

He ran towards the distant sounds and became aware of a new one, a quick "click-click-click," and then a break, and then "click-click-click," drawing rapidly towards him. And presently he saw a dim form looming large on the twilight of the snow, with a mob of smaller beasts yelping at its heels. Every now and again the hunted one would turn and sweep its pursuers into a snarling scatter with its head, and then on again, "click-click-click," panting heavily and well-nigh spent.

The man's blood boiled in him, from the tips of his

gripping fingers to the crown of his bursting head, as he flung himself upon them. He was all aflame with the joy of battle as he cleft through bone and sinew and bristling fronts of shaggy fur. They leaped at him like fiends, with fetid pantings and furious gnashings and the eyes of lost souls, and he laughed aloud as he shook himself free of them and stretched them one by one upon the snow till not a single one was left, for death was in the grip of his fingers and the bite of his axe, and the strange, mad joy of slaughter was upon him.

Then, when all that could go had fled and the rest lay dead, he went to look at the hunted one, and found it lying spent and panting, its red-tipped antlers furrowing the snow with every breath. He soothed it gently, and it lay looking doubtfully up at him out of its great sad eyes. It was bleeding in several places from the sharp fangs of the wolves, but the blood froze and dried as he looked. He delved into the snow with his axe and rooted up some moss, and the poor beast nibbled it gratefully. When he turned to go, it lumbered heavily to its feet and followed him back to his hut. He gave it an armful of moss, and it lay in the snow and ruminated thoughtfully on the hardships of reindeer life and the unbridled appetites of wolves.

And the man could not sleep that night. His blood had been stirred beyond its wont. His brain was quickened to new life. The forgotten past beat on the closed doors like a wild bird against the bars, and he

came nearer to himself than he had been since the curtain fell.

His ill-assorted family gave him constant occupation. Instinct and natural depravity sent his wolves leaping at the newcomer the moment they set eyes on it, and the reindeer received them with lowered antlers and imminent death. By dint of chastisement and much scolding, he succeeded in convincing the sharp noses that deer meat was not their portion in life, and they patched up an armed truce, and became in time so far accustomed to one another as to live together without fighting.

Then, at last, the long grim night began to soften over the distant forest-lands. He watched it with a gleam of hope. The darkness was certainly lightening. In time the curse might pass.

And so one time — for there being no day and no night he had lost all count of time — when he crept out of his hut, he found daylight returned and the red rim of the sun peeping at him over the distant hummocks of the wide white plains. He fell on his knees in the snow and thanked God, in his own way, for the blessed sight of it. The curse had passed and God had not forgotten him.

## CHAPTER LXIV

THE coming of the sun quickened all things to new life.

The moss land shook off its thrall of ice and snow, and gloomed gray and brown again, with here and there a feeble green. The stunted and misshapen forest trees broke out into bud and leaf. The hollows mirrored clear blue skies in their glassy pools, and up the river and all its shallow tributaries the silver salmon came leaping, in such strenuous shoals that all the waters and even the air above the water were aglow with them, and for the man the time of plenty had come. And from beyond the forest-lands came flocks of birds so immense that at times the sky was hidden by them.

Everything sang of the loosing of fetters and the joys of freedom. The mosses were alive, the waters teemed with life and laughed up at the sun, and the air was full of the whirr and chatter of birds.

It was in keeping with the natural resurrection going on all about him that the man whose brain had been so long in bonds and darkness should drop his shackles also and come forth whole and free.

More than once of late he had come very near to

the edge of the curtain. It had rustled in front of him as if about to rise.

The quickening of the spring told in him also. Perhaps the ampler faring helped, for now he had but to dip his hand into one of the shallow streams and seize a fish and he lived well.

He was like a man whom some fact or word or name for the moment eludes. It is on the tip of his tongue, but he cannot just grasp it. The slightest thing may suggest it, and it was just that slightest thing that let the light into Stepan Iline's darkened brain.

He had gone to pick up a fish for his morning meal, with his wolf-cubs frisking gaily at his heels. As he bent to the water, his eye lighted on a bunch of frail blue flowers, the first he had seen that season.

He stood for a moment staring eagerly at them. Something stirred in his brain. He fell on his knees beside them and murmured, "Little Katenka!"

He gathered the flowers, forgetful of his fish, and went back quickly to his hut, and there was a new light of expectancy in his face. He looked in through the open door. The light died out of his face, and it crumpled suddenly with the rush of his thronging thoughts.

He drew his open hand across his eyes and brow, as though bodily lifting away the curtain behind which his life had lain so long. Then he sat heavily down, staring fixedly at the blue flowers in his hand.

And presently he was lying on his face, with his hands

clasping his aching head, as the unwonted thoughts came struggling into it. And slowly, slowly, with the pains almost of a new birth, the black veil drew off from his brain and the past came back to him.

“Little Katenka! — Katia! — Baby Stepan!” — he had them all at last. Then — “Peter Krop!”

Then he got to Paschkin, and the blood boiled dangerously in his head. And then he remembered — Paschkin was past, and he recalled that other little Katenka, whose pleading face had turned the edge of his thirsty axe, when it could have drunk its fill of Paschkin.

Slowly and painfully he pieced it all together, with many a deep sigh as the harrow of awakening memory raked open the old wounds, and bitter grinding of teeth at every thought of Paschkin.

They were all gone out of his life, all gone.

Stay! There was Peter Krop. Peter had been good to him. He wondered if he too was dead. He had been dead himself and now he was alive again. Perhaps Old Peter was still alive. He would go and see.

And then and there, just as he was, with all the inconsequence of a jangled mind, he set off in search of him.

His axe was in his belt, his staff in his hand. He set his face to the distant woods, and never once looked back to the house, which he left with its door standing wide.

His wolves bounded before him, delighted to be up and doing. His reindeer followed like a dog.

So Stepan Iline came out of the shadows and back to his kind.

## CHAPTER LXV

SIX days later, with his menagerie toiling down-castly in the rear, Iline stumbled silently into an encampment of wandering Samoyedes in the woods. He had walked doggedly on, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left, possessed of only one idea and living mostly in the past. He had rested little and eaten less, and would undoubtedly have dropped and died before long had he not fallen in with the wanderers.

They eyed him with wonder, but saw that he was starving and gave him food, which made him sick at first, but presently strengthened him. They questioned him as well as they were able, and set him down as possessed when he told them he had passed the winter alone in the tundra. As one short-witted but harmless, they suffered him among them, and found him of use, whatever his lack might be. And, since they were sure to seek the lower steppes sooner or later, he stayed with them gratefully and repaid them as he could.

They were a slow-blooded, none-too-nimble-witted race, their round hairless faces and deep heavy-lidded eyes full of cunning, their manners and customs as debased as well could be. But he had nothing worth stealing, and now that he had come to himself he



craved human companionship. His soul in exile had shunned its fellows and been satisfied with the more tolerant beasts. Now, even the company of these uncouth wanderers was sweet to him.

One of the occupants of the jurt in which he was permitted a corner puzzled him for a time. He sat at meals with the rest, but never seemed to eat, though food was always offered to him. Most of his time was spent in a corner opposite the one Stepan occupied, and he sat there all day long without moving or speaking. He was muffled up in reindeer skins and was evidently helpless, for he had to be carried to and from his place, and at night had to be undressed and laid in his bed.

Stepan watched him with compassion. Here was one in worse case even than himself. Pity moved him to the proffer of service. When he ventured it, to his amazement he found its object a wooden image, and learned later that it represented the head of the family who had died two years before, but was in this strange way kept still alive in their memories.

That was one of the least unpleasant of their many curious customs, but they were not without their good points. They were skilled hunters and trappers, hardy and courageous in the chase; and when the hunting was good, they lived well and did not grudge the stranger his portion. In the handling of the axe he could beat them all, and so repaid them in the fashion-

ing of household implements and the tinkering of their sledges.

His chief troubles arose through his wolves. They were very tame, but were none the less offensive to the herds of reindeer which were the nomads' chief possessions, and he was for ever having to defend them from the assaults of their enemies.

He excited his hosts' perpetual astonishment, too, in the nicety of his eating, and most especially in his insistence upon cooking his food and that of his wolves. For themselves, flesh was flesh and fish was fish, and whether cooked or raw was entirely matter of individual taste and enterprise. Finally he took to binding his wolves' mouths so that they should eat only what he gave them, whereby they were at a disadvantage with other dogs scarcely more domesticated than themselves; and many a battle royal ensued, till the man built a tiny jurt of his own and let them sleep inside with him, as they had done in the hut on the moss.

He was very quiet, very silent, very gentle, especially with the women and the children. Something there was about him which attracted the latter beyond the bounds of fear or shyness, and made him fellow to them all. He played with them, carried them on his back, made rude toys for them, nursed them when they were out of sorts, and never one of them ever had from him harsh word or angry look. Whereby he unconsciously captured their mothers' liking too, and many a dainty

— such as it was — found its way to the stranger's platter. Not that their dainties greatly appealed to him, for habit had made his requirements small, but in every child he found something of his lost Katenka, and in every woman a reminder of Katia.

From his silence and reserve, and the fact that he had come alone out of the northern wilds, the men deemed him first crazy, then possessed, and in the latter estate were inclined to treat him with somewhat of the awe which was the allotted portion of their own occasional mystery-men. But his unprofessional lack of demands upon their credulity or their pockets, puzzled them exceedingly, and their minds remained in doubt.

There came a day, however, which raised him high in their estimation, and after that they treated him almost as one of themselves.

They were travelling slowly southwards through interminable forest-lands, where the trees grew so close and so tall that their journeying was in perpetual twilight. Their course was slow and spasmodic. Where they camped and set up their jurts, there they stopped till their herds of reindeer had cleared the neighbourhood of sustenance. Then they sought fresh pasturage. Their greatest trouble was with the wolves which were still ranging the twilight woods, seeking what they might devour, since it was still too early for their daintier faring on baby sealdom up north. Con-

stant watchfulness was necessary, and in this the stranger took his full share.

One night, while he was on duty in the rough enclosure into which the reindeer were always driven, it was attacked by an unusually hungry pack of prowlers. The men of the camp gathered hastily with their spears to repel them. The stranger, with nothing but his axe, leaped out among the snarling crew, and with eager cries and raised laughter smote them right and left, with such exuberance of enjoyment in the slaughter as confirmed the onlookers in their belief in his possession. Single-handed he hacked and cleft, heedless of bitings and tearings, and so far removed from thought of fear that his joy in the battle was obvious to all. And when the hungry yelpers turned at last and fled, he pursued them with jeers and scornful cries. The men of the camp were tried hunters, but no man among them would have fought a pack of hungry wolves single-handed. A vast amazement entered into their new regard for him, so very different was he from the gentle player with the children they had taken him to be, and thereafter they looked upon him with deference and respect.

What it was that set him to the building of another house on wheels it would not be easy to say. Possibly the discomforts of his tiny skin tent, and the trouble of constantly taking it to pieces and putting it together again, possibly the desire for congenial occupation,

Possibly the sight of tree trunks so symmetrically round that the suggestion of wheels in them was inevitable.

Whatever the reason, the idea came to him and he set to work to carry it out. His wheels were the result of hundreds of years of slow upbuilding and of months of careful fashioning. But once he had them to his mind, the rest proceeded apace. Wood was there for the taking, but of tools he had hardly any beyond his axe. The outcome was strength rather than elegance, but it served.

His hands were never idle, and yet his small friends were cognisant of no neglect. With patient persistence he hacked and chopped and shaped, and the children sat watching the chips fly and wondered what he was making. Piece by piece he got together the framework of his house, transporting it, when they moved from place to place, on the backs of his reindeer, of which he now owned half a dozen, the outcome of the mingled feelings of the community respecting his valour, his good nature, and his incomprehensibility.

The building did him good. It occupied his mind and strengthened it with long, deep thoughts of that other house and its occupants. Those dearest ones of all were gone, indeed, and could never be replaced. He could build a new house, but he could not people it again, nor furnish it with that perfect happiness which comes of perfect contentment. Here were other

helpless ones, however, and the treasures of a heart that was naturally full of tenderness, but which had been warped and twisted by man's malignancy, were given freely to these alien ones.

When, in due time, during a longer halt than usual, he at last put his house together, pinning it firmly with wooden bolts for lack of nails, and set it on its platform on the wheels, the astonishment of the onlookers was great. Here surely was a man beyond most. He played with children like a child, fought wolves in the pack single-handed, and built houses on wheels the like of which neither they nor their fathers had ever wildly dreamed of.

He accustomed his reindeer to drag the house, and, going or standing, from the first turn of the creaking wheels, it was rarely free of children. All day long it rang with merry shouts and laughter, but they only made him think the more of what he had lost, and he was gravely silent amid it all.

When the nomads met the traders to bargain off their accumulated pelts for such necessities and luxuries as their wanderings craved, the silent one came to the front once more. Hitherto the wily traders had had things very much their own way, with corresponding enjoyment and profit to themselves. Iline listened to the bargaining for some time in silence, but he had had too much business experience not to perceive the disadvantages under which his rustic friends laboured,

and was too friendly disposed toward them not to resent it.

He stepped quietly into the trafficking, and took their interests in hand in a way that set many eyes on both sides wider than their wont. His friends got half as much again for their goods as they had ever got before, and Stepan Iline became a man of still greater consequence among them. In such very high esteem was he held, indeed, that when in the course of their regular wanderings they set their faces to the east, and he would have gone on to the south, they could not bring themselves to the parting, and at last succeeded in getting him to stay with them for a time longer.

After all, there was much to induce him thereto. It was a life of absolute freedom, secure in the immensity of its range from any possible interference from police, governor, or Tzar. His position in the little community was one of honour, his influence great, and the results visible already in the more reputable habits which his life among them had inspired.

Perhaps the most remarkable outward manifestation of his unconscious influence and their upward progress was the spirit of emulation which set them all to the construction of caravans similar to his own. He did his best to dissuade them, pointing out that he had built his for travelling south over the steppes, and that for their winter journeyings over the snow and through the forest-lands their own methods were the best.

But they were like children after new toys and would not be put off, and so long as they kept to the steppes they found their houses on wheels all that they had hoped. When the winter came, and they took to the woods after pelts and furs, they found his views were right, and finally they left their caravans all in a row on the border of the forest-lands to be picked up on their return in the spring.

For over a year he lived with them, sharing all their labours of the chase and of the road, to their great content and greatly to his own upbuilding and strengthening. And then, when their faces were once more set to the south, the longing came over him again for Peter Krop and the old life, in spite of all its limitations and restraints.

He saw them advantageously through their trafficking once more, and then, in spite of all they could urge, exchanged his reindeer — a goodly herd by this time — for a couple of horses, and with his own collection of skins and furs as the basis of a new start in life, bade them farewell, and laid his lonely course for the Yenisei.

The men and women stood gazing gloomily after him till he was out of sight, and the children wept aloud at his going and missed him sorely for many a day. Having known no other life, they could not understand why he should want to leave them, and if he had tried to make it clear to them he could not have done so. With



them he had everything man could want, — honour, influence, comparative wealth, — and he was going back to the narrower life of the made roads and villages, to the arbitrary control of authority, to the bonds of civilised life, — to Peter Krop.

It was the thought of old Peter, the man who had befriended him in his need, that drew him back. If Peter should be dead, like all the rest of those he had loved, he would come back, he said to himself, and live and die with these newer friends in the wilderness.

And so he waved his last farewells to the wanderers and set his face steadily to the Yenisei.

## CHAPTER LXVI

It was more than three years since Stepan Iline had disappeared so strangely from Krasnoiarsk, when Peter Krop, lying peacefully in the door of his travelling house as it jogged slowly northward along the border toward Terchinsk one evening, got a surprise which he never quite got over.

For, coming along the road from the opposite direction, he saw in the distance another house on wheels, so like his own that for a time he believed himself to be dreaming. By its side walked a man, and to and fro, before and behind, bounded a couple of huge, long-legged brown dogs with bushy tails. Peter looked at them again and thought they were wolves, and when they came near he was sure of it, and so were his horses.

But he had little time to give to them just then, for the man who strode by the side of his team, with a long, firm step that told of strength, waved his hand to him, and came running along with the bounding beasts at his side, and Peter's horses snorted at the near sight and smell of them.

"Stepan Iline! Is it possible?" cried old Peter, with raised hands. "Now, God be praised! I thought you dead."

"I have been dead, but am come to life again," said Stepan.

"Where have you been?" asked old Peter, in vast amazement.

"I have been among the northern men who live on the edge of the great moss-land. But for how long I do not know."

"It is over three years since you went away."

"Three years!" said Stepan, musingly. "That is a long time to be dead. But they have been quiet years, and now I am alive again," and old Peter regarded him gravely.

"I do not think I am out of my mind, Peter Petrovitch," said Stepan. "But when one has been dead three years, one does not come back all at once."

"And what have you been doing up there all the time?"

"For much of the time I do not know. But since then I have built my house. The wheels are not good, but I will get better ones. You see, when I came to life, I knew the time would come when I must keep moving on again. A dead man may rest in peace, but when one is alive one must keep moving on."

"But you will stop with me now, Stepan Ivanovitch," said Peter Krop, with a great longing swimming in his dark eyes.

And Stepan, seeing how old and lonely he looked, said: "Yes, I will stop with you, Peter Petrovitch, as

long as I may. And that is what I came for, but I must keep moving on, you know."

"I will move on too," said the old man, and thenceforward they journeyed in company.

"I have something of thine inside here," said old Peter, suddenly, as they sat side by side on the front seat of his caravan, as being the smoother goer of the two.

"What then?"

"Up there in the corner," said the old man, with a backward jerk of the shoulder.

And Stepan, peering in, encountered the solemn gaze of a pair of great, round eyes, and scrambled quickly inside.

"It is the little white brother," he said huskily, overcome with the crowding thoughts the sight of the little one evoked. And he lifted him gently down from his perch alongside the holy images, and stroked him tenderly, and the little brother bit his finger softly by way of greeting.

"Philip Alexandrovitch, of the inn at Krasnoiarsk, said you left him in his care, and he had fed him each day. But he was very sad when first I found him. He has been happier since we have been on the road," said Peter, when Stepan had come back and sat down beside him. And they rode for a long while in silence.

"It seems strange, you know, Peter Petrovitch, that

the little brother should live when all the others are gone," said Stepan, musingly, after a long time.

"It is the will of God," said old Peter, quietly.

Bit by bit, as they rode together and sat over their fire of a night, Peter drew from him what he remembered of the past three years. It was not much nor very connected, but Peter's shrewd wits were able to fill in some of the gaps.

Stepan told him, somewhat shamefacedly, of how he had had Paschkin under his axe and let him go.

"But I could not kill him unless I killed the child first, Peter Krop," he said deprecatingly. "And I could not kill the child, no, not if it had been to save my own life. She was so very like my own little Katenka."

"You did quite right," said Peter, slowly. "Your soul will sleep the quieter that his blood is not on your hands. He is dead."

"Paschkin is dead?" said Stepan, with a kindling of the eye.

"He was killed by the Cossacks whom he tried to put down with an overstrong hand."

"And the little Katenka?"

"I have never even heard speak of her. You are quite sure — Stepan Ivanovitch —" he began.

"Quite sure she was real?" said Stepan, soberly. "She was real enough to turn my axe, which had thirsted seven years for Paschkin's blood, Peter Petrovitch."

"It may have been an angel sent by God to save you from the shedding of blood," said old Peter, thoughtfully.

"Undoubtedly! But all the same she came with Paschkin, which is strange to think of, and she stayed with him, which is stranger still."

Old Peter, in his own mind, was doubtful, but he knew better than to say so. Whatever Stepan's state of mind had been during the years he was "dead," it was sound enough now, though slightly out of touch with things, as was but natural.

Stepan's wolves were for a time a source of disquietude to old Peter, as they were to his horses. But Stepan in his quaint way explained them thus:—

"They are a part of myself, Peter Petrovitch. When everything else went from me, that night in the snow, these were given to me to care for. When all that had been in my heart died out of it because Paschkin still lived, these two lay in my bosom, and I have come to love them. They were with me in the moss-land, and they were all I had. They do not know they are wolves, and they have never eaten raw in their lives. I can see their mother's eyes yet as I chopped her in two while she ate to feed them. She was only a wolf, but yet she was a mother, and I cannot forget her. If ever they learn they are wolves, I may have to kill them, but I hope they will not, for I love them."

At times he spoke of Katia, and little Katenka, and

Baby Stepan, and of the happy times they had had together, and for every Katia and Katenka and Stepan he came across on their rounds he had kindly words and little gifts.

Those names opened his heart and his hand, and as the names were as good as any others and gifts in that land were rare, it came to pass that all along the routes he travelled, Katias, Katenkas, and Stepans sprang up like flowers round a spongy hollow of the steppe. And when they saw him coming they ran to meet him with merry shouts and open arms, and he gathered them all in, a rich harvest to a heart that had well-nigh died of starvation.

Old Peter watched it all with dry smiles and kindly eyes. It was against his principles to give anything for nothing, and he was naturally of a somewhat mistrustful nature. But he saw that it gladdened Stepan's heart and he would not interfere with his bargaining, unprofitable though it was from a worldly point of view. This man was to him as the son returned to his father, and he would deny him nothing.

He tried hard to get Paschkin's decree reversed, now that Paschkin was dead. But it was no one's business to reverse it, and no one would take it upon himself to do so, and at last he gave it up.

The first time Stepan found himself within reach of Orkaorsk, away down in the south of Tomsk, he journeyed thither and unburdened himself of a debt.

He found out the relatives of Ignat Pestal and restored to them the money he had found on Pestal's dead body, and a liberal allowance for his horses. And Pestal's relatives, not at all understanding the matter, but understanding perfectly the value of money, rejoiced greatly and did not mourn unduly over Ignat, who had wasted his substance in too copious libations and had been something of a nuisance.



## CHAPTER LXVII

As soon as the first snows fell, Stepan insisted on old Peter laying up in winter quarters. Then, having seen him comfortably settled, he set off again with his own old house and his wolves, and sometimes Peter never set eyes on him for months. And when he did come back, if the house on wheels could have talked, it would have had strange stories to tell.

For wherever Stepan heard of raidings by the bloody fangs, there he went. And whenever he could come across them, he fought them, with gun and spear and axe, as no man ever fought them before.

And the Katias and Katenkas and Stepan of the marches would have fled if they had seen him then. For he fought as one possessed — Berserk he fought, with wild shouts of laughter and derisive cries, while he shore through bristling ruffs and gnashing teeth and eyes like hungry devils, as they leaped at his throat. And he felt once more the fierce lust of slaughter and the mad thrill that ran through leg and loin as they tightened to the fight, through hand and arm, through muscle and sinew, right up into his brain, and he lived life at its keenest in the face of leaping death and felt the deaths die out close under his hand.

At such times he was scarcely human, but it made for quietness at other times. For, once his rage was spent, he was all man again; and he came back to Peter Krop, scarred and torn on the outside, indeed, but gentle and kindly within. And all the spring and summer and autumn they jogged quietly along their accustomed rounds, and the village folk welcomed them everywhere, and all the little Katias and Katenkas and Stepan ran to meet the house on wheels with open arms and shouts of happy laughter.

Time came when Peter Krop received his call, and when he lay dying in the old house on wheels which had known Katia and little Katenka and Baby Stepan, he gave Stepan his blessing, and told him where his money was bestowed and how to lay hands upon it.

"You will not make it grow," he said, smiling a little sadly at the thought.

"Yea, but I will, Peter Petrovitch."

"Ay, I know — in your own way. And you might so easily make twenty, thirty per cent on it."

"I will do better than that."

"Well, it is yours, my son. Do with it as you will, but you will never be a rich man."

"I am richer than most already, and now I shall be richer still."

But old Peter knew in what his riches consisted, and he only smiled and shook his head at such unbusiness-like notions.

"Do with it as you will," he said again. "I thank God who brought us together. Lay me by your wife and the little ones on the hillside by Chernsk. Perhaps, in the mercy of God, we shall all meet again."

And Stepan buried him there as he had wished, with the two wolves gambolling in the first thin flurries of the winter's snow as mourners.

He fought their kinsfolk of the steppes more fiercely than ever that winter, but left themselves in charge of Gnut of the hut on the river bank, with strict injunctions to feed them nothing raw and to see that they got no fishbones.

And in the spring, with cooled blood and clear eyes, he journeyed to Krasnoiarsk and bought him bells, a deep, clear "crimson" in the middle, which he called Katia, and two silvery chimers at the sides, which he called little Katenka and Baby Stepan, and when the sound of them rang out, sweet and plaintive along the steppes and up the valleys, all their little namesakes ran out to greet them and him with open arms and shouts of merry laughter.

As Peter Krop had foretold, he did not make the money grow as Peter himself would have done, but, as he had foretold himself, he reaped a mighty harvest of a different kind, cent per cent and more, in the joy of giving, and never regretted the other.

The mothers used laughingly to tell him that he was

growing closer in his dealings as he grew older. But that, he told them, was for their good, since, unless they paid proper prices, they would never know the value of money. And if he took with one hand he gave with the other — to those who could not buy.

When the Katias and Katenkas grew up to years of indiscretion, and married the Stepan who could barely support them, there came simple additions to the meagre furnishings of the callow nests, from the same open hand that had furnished shoubkas and capotes and shoes to growing boys and girls.

When the never-failing babies came, from the same observant hand came cradles and gear, and the babies were naturally all Katias — and thereby all Katenkas — or Stepan. So that all that country side is full of Katias and Stepan to this day.

And that which had been imposed as a curse distilled itself in blessing, and Stepan Iline through strait doors entered into a wide place.

While he lived he was an institution. When he died he became a legend.

Never once did he set foot in Irkutsk after Katia joined him, and never once did he remain longer than ten days in any one place, except that time when they were snowed up in the hills beyond Chernsk, and again during that blank space when he lost count of time and lived alone on the great moss-land and among the wanderers of the twilight woods.

He died, as he had lived, on the road. And, literally, on the move.

For one day the sweet-toned bells rang out his coming, and the children ran to greet the white-haired old man with open arms and shouts of merry laughter, and for once he did not answer them. They trooped along beside the house on wheels in murmuring surprise, till their elders came, and stopped the horses, and climbed inside, and found him lying dead, with a smile on his face, and, in the breast of his sheepskin coat, a little white owl, which blinked feebly and pecked remonstratively at those who, for his own good, drew him gently out. But the wolves which used to frolic in front of the horses were gone, and they were never seen again.

He had turned his horses toward Chernsk when he felt the end coming, and they buried him out on the hillside by the side of those he loved.

But the little white brother lived on in that village for many years, cared for by all, and died at last full of wisdom and honour. And the boy who would have dared to throw stick or stone at Stepan Iline's little white owl would have repented the deed in sackcloth and ashes, and would not have sat down in comfort for very many days.

And the mothers of that country still tell to wide-eyed little Katenkas and Stepan the stories they heard from their mothers, which they again heard from their

mothers, and they from theirs — as far back as you please — of the strange, good Stepan Iline, who travelled the land in a house on wheels, with two gaunt brown wolves bounding before him, and a little white owl on its perch inside, and never stopped anywhere, yet brought a blessing wherever he went.

And sometimes, when the wind is howling round the wooden roofs, little ears are on the strain, and little fingers go to little lips, and little hopeful voices say, “S-s! I hear the bells of Stepan Iline!” and they wish they had lived in the times when his bells rang out along the steppes and all the children ran to meet him.

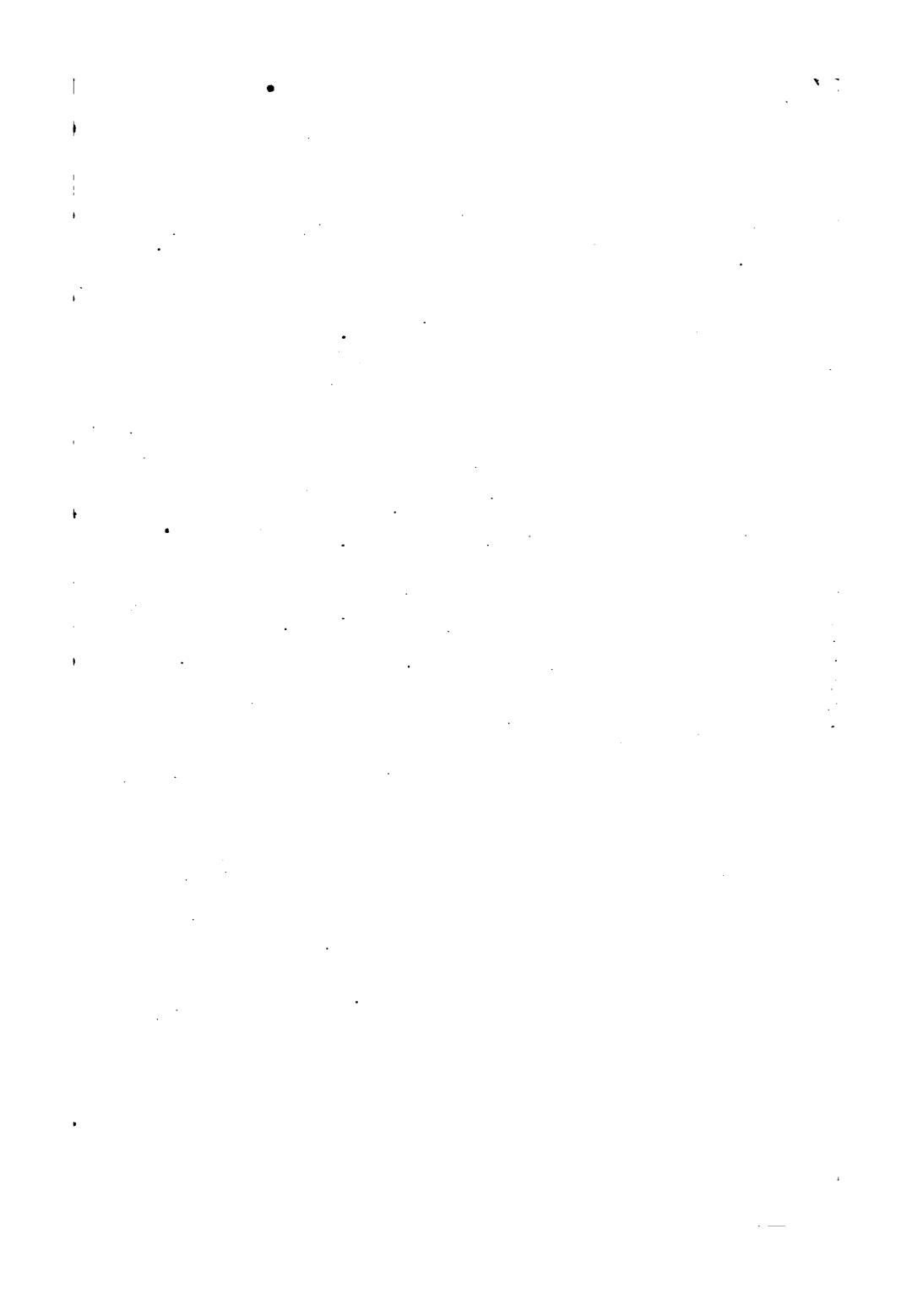
For the very earliest thing they remember, when they were nothing but little round bundles, with little round buttons for noses, and little blue dots for eyes, was this:—

Whisht, Baby! Whisht!  
Quick below the cover!  
Down into your nest, my bird!  
And — don't — you — dare — peep — over!  
For the gray wolves they are prowling,  
They are prowling, they are prowling.  
And the snow wind it is howling,  
It is howling, it is howling.  
Hark! — Hark! —  
Out there in the dark —  
Ow — ooh! Ow — ooh!  
S-s-s-s-see — oo — ooh!  
And the wolves they are lean,  
So-o-o lean, so-o-o lean!

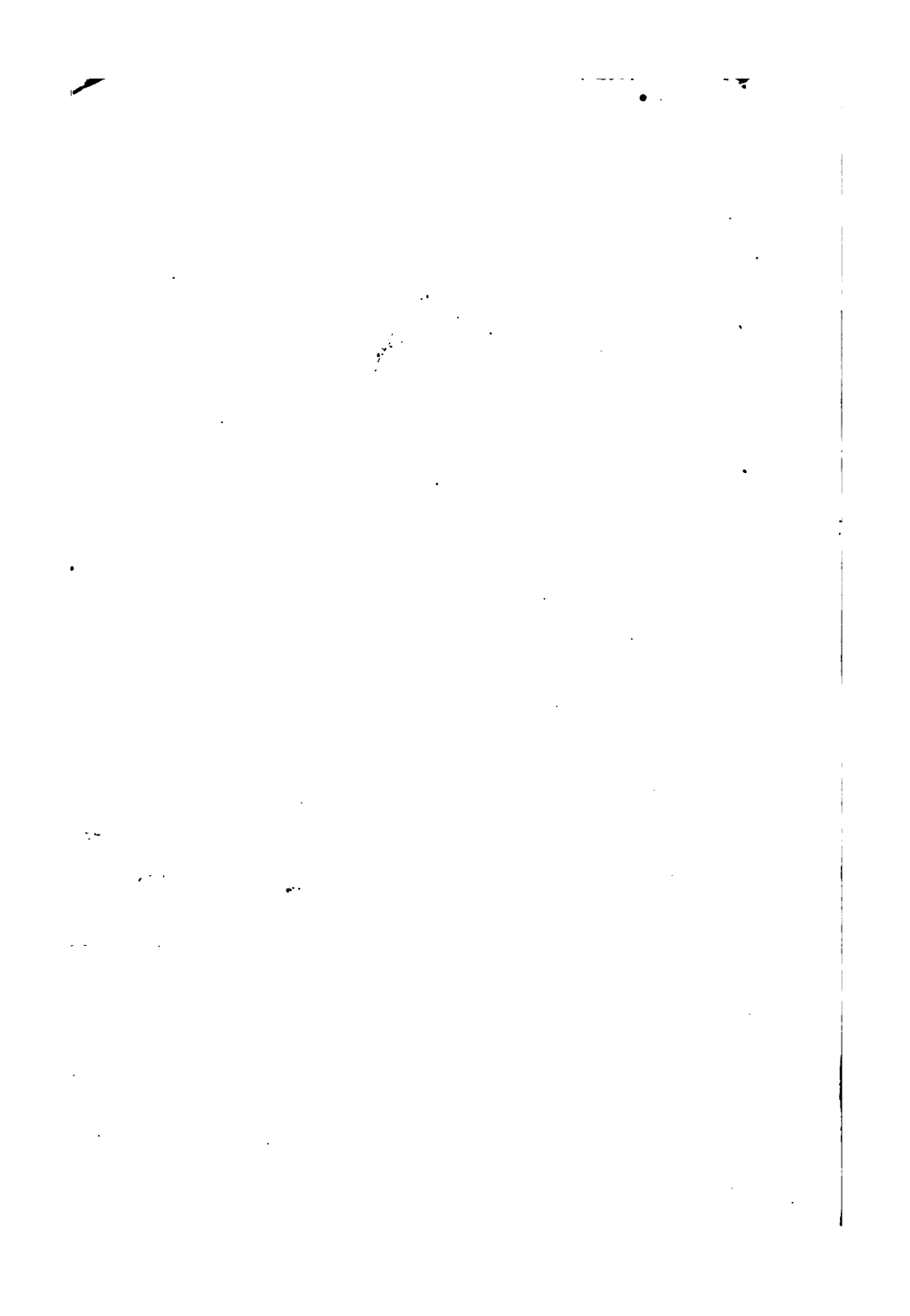
## THE LONG ROAD

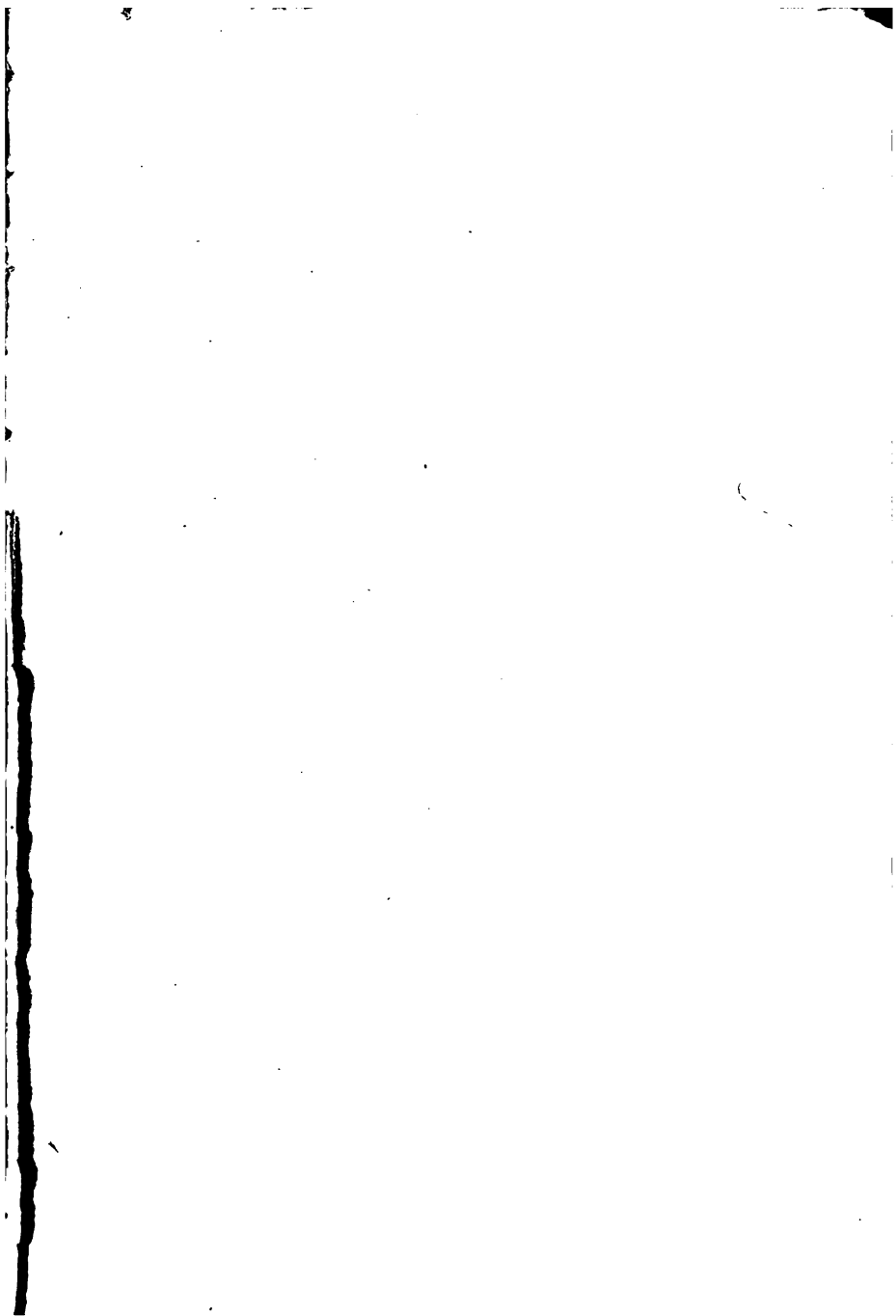
And the wind it is keen,  
So-o-o keen, so-o-o keen!  
And they seek little babies who aren't sleeping!  
But lie you still, my Baby dear!  
Lie still, lie still, and maybe you'll hear —  
Hark! — Hark! —  
But there in the dark, —  
The silver bells and the golden bells,  
The swinging bells and the singing bells, —  
The bells that are heard but never are seen,  
The wind and the wolves, and the bells in between, —  
The bells of Iline,  
Good Stepan Iline, —  
The bells of good Stepan  
Iline!











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